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Second Safest City in America

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A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St. Louis in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

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Second Safest City in America

stories

Liam Cassidy

Second Safest City in America is a collection of short fiction set in Midwestern cities and suburbs, as well as the Gulf Coast. These stories explore the untethered expectations, broken promises, and absurdity of American life. The characters are violent, funny, emotionally unstable, politically wrong-minded, and compassionate. They implore empathy or actively avoid the pain of others. They search out security or take matters into their own hands. They sacrifice and they seek revenge. They are not outliers in this country. They are part of the mainstream weirdness that permeates everything.

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A Different Kind of Guy

When I saw the woman and her little girl coming down the street at nearly three in the morning I figured I knew what kind of mother she was. The type that just keeps on partying. Managing the bar, I see that a lot. I go out front to take a break and there will be some sleeping child locked in the back seat of a car with the window cracked, or some abandoned kid waiting out on the curb sucking his thumb. I see these kids and sometimes I try to make conversation as normally as you can with a kid that age out on the street in the middle of the night. I ask about school and stuff, and most of them, to their credit, will just shrug and inch away, peer through the window past the huddle of adult bodies, looking for their momma, or daddy, or both.

I remember this one boy in particular, he had a long face like a football turned on end. His fat bald-headed baby brother was strapped into a cheap stroller with yellowing wheels, nostrils and lips caked with powdered donut. The older boy held fast onto the handles of the stroller and pushed up his chin as if he were the captain of a ship.

Not a moment after I said hi to him did this boy begin to spew a tangle of language like nothing I have ever heard, a summation of his life up to that moment. He made the basketball team and scored a million points. This was because he got new shoes—and he showed me the shoes, swollen tongued things with blinking lights in the heels.

He got a dog (a Rottweiler), and a cat (a lynx), and a pet monkey he named Cheetos all in the same day. He said once he was abducted by aliens and saw the moon up close. There was a playground there only for the "lost boys." When I asked him who the lost boys were he said that it was secret and you had to know the secret password and you could only know the secret password if you were a lost boy. Then he asked me for a cigarette, and I gave it to him. That was back when I still smoked. I didn't light it or anything, but he stuck it in his pocket and kept on yapping. I could only think one thing while he talked.

This kid is doomed.

I had the same feeling when the little girl was walking toward me. She was knock-kneed like a baby deer, with two stiff braids pointing straight out from the back of her head. She swayed, drunk with sleepiness. The girl's mother lagged almost ten feet behind. I had just closed down the bar and was standing underneath the awning, next to the locked up patio furniture. The rain must have just stopped because the sidewalks still vibrated like plucked strings. Looking east toward downtown I could see a gash in the pale skin of clouds. Stars showed through like little knife points. The banshee wail of an ambulance rose up and faded, and a helicopter flew over fast and low. I had this sense then, looking at the city, that the buildings were all put there by accident. Like a shopping cart stolen from a grocery store. A car stuck in the muddy bank of the river, its taillights still flashing. I can't exactly explain that feeling, but I guess I didn't like the city much then. I used to wake up early to jog down to the river. I'd watch the fog move in and smother everything, and when the fog burned away I'd jog home and go back to sleep.

A car shushed by, lights winking. All around there was that sweetness that fills the air before spring. An oppressively sentimental smell that made me want to break the

promise I made to my wife and smoke. I had a vape that was meant to help, but I never used it. The smoke was too thick, white as bleached cotton. I didn't like the flavors either. Standing against a brick wall on a rainy night, draped in a cloak of theatric melancholy, to lift my head and let out a bubblegum stinking plume just didn't feel right. There was something about not knowing what was in them too. At least with cigarettes I knew what was going to kill me.

I headed up the sidewalk to make my way to the back parking lot. The girl walked past me with her eyes closed. I smiled at the mother. To smile at a stranger is a Midwestern instinct. A weakness if you ask me, and sometimes all you can do is try to keep that smile neutral, beholden to none of what a smile usually signifies, which to me is an outright willingness to be manipulated. She smiled back, and I knew I couldn't escape.

"Excuse me," she said. I looked over my shoulder, but I didn't stop. I had the usual line pursed on my lips.

Sorry don't got any cash.

Which is usually true, and was actually true that night since I gave the bar back my last ten bucks. And why is that? Why did I give him my last ten bucks? So he could go buy cigarettes at the market right? Why'd I quit smoking in the first place if all I'm going to do is give away the money I saved for somebody else's habit? I didn't even ask for the change.

Anyway, the mother must have read my mind.

"I don't want any money," she said, which was a relief to me so I started to go on my way. "Please," she called out. I stopped and turned around again. The little girl held

onto the trunk of a young tree as if she might be sucked up into the sky, right through that hole in the clouds out into cold space.

"I'm trying to meet a friend. We just need a ride," the mother said.

I looked the woman up and down. She wasn't physically imposing. She was short, and plump. Her hair stuck flat against her head except where it flared out on the sides like ragged wings. Off one shoulder hung a black leather purse with some ridiculous fringe straight out of Dollywood. She let the purse hang open as if there were nothing of value inside. On her back she carried a shapeless satchel made of cheap pink nylon with a cartoon kitten screen printed on the outside. She didn't walk with the usual stick-legged gait of a drug addict. Rather she slouched, as if life was just a bad movie she regretted having paid for.

I've given lots of strangers rides in the past. College kids too drunk to get themselves a cab. A woman underdressed for the weather, whose friend left her at the bar alone. I used to drive this schizo guy home a couple times a week. He had piercings in his eyebrows and nose. He used to come into the bar right when we opened to play shuffle board alone, traipsing dutifully from end to end, playing himself and only himself with a determination that seemed to be completely unaffected by the fact that he would always win and always lose. I felt bad for him until one night when he grabbed the steering wheel and jerked us into oncoming traffic. After that I stopped giving him rides. I stopped giving anyone rides.

With this job I had to become well versed in saying no, because at the end of the night there would always be at least one sad case left at the bar. Looking for a ride. Looking for one more drink. Looking to share another tragic story. My wife says you can't

help everyone, and she's right. But it's easier to refuse an adult on their own, because, well, we're all supposed to take care of ourselves. When there is a kid involved though, it's like a cheap trick. The girl looked up at the branches of the thin sapling. The new leaves twinkled, heavy with raindrops. The mother bounced in place and hugged herself, rubbing her arms to keep warm. I couldn't say no, and she knew it.

I wasted some time there mulling it over anyway. I looked around cautiously, because of course it would be stupid not to. Across the street from the bar there are these three recently rehabbed buildings. They have all new windows, bone white panes against the dark red brick. They look as awkward as a new pair of stylish glasses on a dull face. The owners must have been a tad too optimistic when they envisioned the revival of the neighborhood. The buildings have remained vacant for years and are constantly broken into. That night a man lurked in one of the doorways. His puffy white coat made him look like a roosting chicken. He stared out at us, or he was sleeping I couldn't tell which. People around there are always either pacing around, talking to no one, or dead asleep in some unnatural position. I saw a man once who looked as if he had collapsed at the waist, his head resting on the cement bottom of a street lamp.

I had been the victim of a bait and switch before. Back when I first moved to the city. One person came from the front, looking all pathetic and telling some sob story. He needed some money. A dollar thirty-five for some Fix-it Flat. It's always a specific amount they want. Then the other guy came from behind and bashed me over the head. When they found my pockets empty, but for my iPhone which was already shattered, one of the would-be thieves screamed at me like I was his disappointing child.

You lucky!

Dazed by the hit, I didn't understand. All the nuances of human language were knocked out of my head.

"Thank you," I said. He looked down at me for a second, then kicked me in the stomach.

"We're just up the road. Can't you help us out?" the mother said. Another car passed, wrapped in a cape of spray and we stepped back as far away from the curb as we could manage. The little girl shook the trunk of the tree and rainwater showered over her.

"Stop that," the mother said firmly. The girl froze and stared up at me, her face blank as a rabbit waiting to be chased.

I had to unfold the back seats, and throw a bunch of trash in the trunk while they stood in the rain which had just started up again. I had the night deposit bag hidden in my coat. I stealthily shoved it into the glove compartment. It was embarrassing. I worked quickly, muttering apologies and then apologizing for apologizing, but the mother just smiled shyly. The girl balanced on one foot over a crack in the pavement, humming to herself.

I noticed the mother did not make eye contact with me again, even when I asked her direct questions. She was taking a risk by getting in a car with a strange man, and maybe felt it best not to give too many looks, should they be misinterpreted by a different kind of guy. For all she knew I was a child killer, or molester at least. And to assume I wasn't had to take the kind of blind trust that seemed weird to me. I started to wonder if this woman was using her child as a pawn to get what she ultimately could not do without. Or maybe it was a genuine faith in humanity that I was too cynical to recognize as anything other than wrong-minded.

The girl seemed completely at ease. After I set up the seats she came running and hopped in the back no problem. I told her to buckle her seatbelt and she did so without argument. I got behind the wheel and put on my glasses, hoping maybe that would further assure the mother of my harmlessness. She never looked at me though. She kept her eyes forward and her hands in her lap.

"Okay, so, do you have an address?" I said. I took out my new phone so I could type in the directions. She had mentioned a street, but I didn't know exactly where it was.

"It's just down this road. I'll tell you where to go," she said. I agreed and pulled out of the lot, heading west.

"My friend, she'll help," she said and stared out the window. She was quiet for a moment then spoke again. "I'm going home in a few days."

"Where you from?" I said.

"Dallas. Our bus don't leave till Thursday morning. But when I'm gone, I'm *gone*. Never coming back here. No way, no how, nada, no sir," she said and shook her head. "Ain't coming back to this shithole. No offense."

I couldn't argue against that.

"What brought you here?" I said.

"Her daddy," she said and then she was quiet for a while. She stared out the passenger window as we moved away from the neon fractured gloom to a darker, more industrial area. Train tracks ran parallel to the road. Knee-high tufts of grass nodded in the wind. The sidewalks crumbled into dead ends.

"I got to know where we're going," I said.

"She works at Restaurant Depot," she said. "She told me I could meet her there if I had to. She can help me out."

We were headed right toward a lost cause, and maybe she knew it. I was familiar with Restaurant Depot, it was just two or three miles up the road, but it wouldn't be open at that hour. The money in my glove box began to swell, pressing up against the latch to the point of bursting. I saw the deposit bag exploding like a feather pillow, the dollars sticking to her damp skin, tangling with her hair, the coins spilling out and burying her feet. I thought about Marty. He owns the bar. What would he think about me driving around with this woman and his cash? He'd fire me for sure. I resolved to drive her to the Restaurant Depot, drop her off and be done with this thing. Let her wait there for her friend. We passed a shuttered warehouse, and it's many murky windows. I looked into my rear view mirror and saw the girl. Her face was tilted close to the window, her eyes nearly closed. Her breath formed a misshapen heart on the glass.

When we pulled into the Restaurant Depot's empty parking lot the mother laughed ruefully, like she was the unwitting participant in some inane prank show. There was a light on inside the building, so I pulled up to the front entrance. She quickly unbuckled her seatbelt and leaned over me to look out my window. I could feel the heat from her body and smell her dampness. I pressed up against my seat and stared at the side of her head. There were puckered piercing holes along the outer fold of her left ear, but she wore no jewelry.

"The sign says it closes at eight," she said squinting.

"I see some lights on inside, you think she's still here?" I said.

"She's not," she said and fell back into her seat. She looked out the passenger window. "I don't see her car."

"Okay then," I said. I waited, hoping she would volunteer to get out. She sniffled, but did not turn around. She wiped at her eyes and nose and I knew she was crying.

"What should we do?" I said.

"I'm not going back to her daddy, no way, no sir, nada," she said.

"Okay," I said.

"I'm done with the black eyes and bloody lips," she said. The way she said it was odd and lyrical, like she was practicing for a bad play about domestic violence. I hadn't noticed any injuries before, but she wouldn't face me now. All I could see was the broad side of her left cheek, which was ruddy with acne scars. There was a blurry tattoo on the back of her left hand. "I'm thirty-six dollars short, and if that means we sleep on the street I don't care. We'll camp out in the rain if we have to. I've done it before. We'll have us a camp out, right baby?" The girl didn't answer. "I'm not going to get beat on again."

"No," I said and began to drive out of the lot. She was quiet, but for the sniffles. The girl in the backseat said nothing. I glanced back and saw that she was fast asleep. I tried to look at the mother, to catch a glimpse of her bruises in the fleeting light.

"Do you need to go to the hospital?" I said. She snorted as if the idea was completely absurd and unhelpful. "Should we go to the police?" I said. She didn't answer, but in the corner of my eye I could see she was shaking her head.

"Do you have a phone?" she said after a moment. I hesitated and she must have sensed my reluctance. She knew I had a phone. "It's fine," she said and crossed her arms.

"No, no, it's cool," I said. I dug the phone out of my pocket and handed it to her. I thought she might be calling her friend, but she never put the phone to her ear. She was silent, flicking at the bright screen for a while and grumbling to herself.

"In Dallas they have a service. When you can't pay. There's good people there, they can get you a place to stay. I guess you don't have those here," she said and handed me the phone.

"Well, do you have somewhere else you want to go?" I said.

"Like where?" she said and laughed that strange laugh again. I thought about my apartment, and my shitty little couch, and the sleeping bag still in its original packaging. I thought about my wife asleep in our bed. How the dog would start barking as soon as I walked in with these strangers. How my wife would come out of our room, rubbing her face, her torn pajama pants and Iggy Pop t-shirt. It would be close to the time she usually got up for work, and she would not be happy. Then she would see me and this mother and child. I tried to imagine her face, but could not. I tried to explain. In my head I tried to explain, but the words didn't come.

"I don't know," I said.

"I'm thirty-six dollars short. We'll stay on the street in the rain, I don't care," the mother said. The dashboard beeped at us, and out of habit I turned to her.

"Can you put your seatbelt back on?" I said.

We passed the dark bar and came to the stoplight near where I first saw the girl and her mother walking toward me.

"Back where we started," I said.

"Don't fall asleep baby," the mother said looking over her left shoulder. In the rear view mirror I saw the girl stir. Her head lolled against the back of the seat.

"Where are you staying?" I said.

"A rooming house, it's on the corner there," she said and pointed. She was quiet then and I wished she would just ask for the money. If she had asked in the first place we wouldn't have wasted this time driving to nowhere. I thought about the money in the glove compartment. It wasn't a particularly busy night but there was still fifteen hundred bucks in cash there. But I couldn't do that. Even if I replaced the money I couldn't do that. Then I thought I could easily go to an ATM. I said to myself, *if she asks I will pay for the room*, but she didn't ask. She didn't say anything until we pulled up beside the building.

"Just drop us off here," she said, her voice devoid of that meekness she displayed earlier. It was a low, defensive growl. "Baby, get up, we got to go. We got to pack up."

I drove past the building and had to turn around. The mother was annoyed by this.

"Right here," she said. She snapped off her seat belt again as if she might jump out before I stopped. "Right *here*."

I parked and gazed up at the building. The upper floors looked dark. Not the full and peaceful darkness of a home at sleep, but the fitful restlessness of a vacant building.

"Thank you," the mother said and shouldered the door open. The rain had faded down to a sort of spittle that feels malicious when you're walking through it, like a bully bearing down on you, but I was glad that it wasn't pouring anymore. The mother pulled on the back door handle, but it was locked. The girl was asleep again, her mouth open exposing her tiny teeth. The mother yanked on the door.

"Sorry, sorry," I said and hit the electronic locks. She flung the door open and started unbuckling her child.

"Wake up baby," she said, shaking her gently. "We got to go, we got to pack." The girl opened her eyes and blinked at me like she couldn't comprehend my function, then slid coolly off the seat and stared up at the sky.

"Good luck," I said but my words were cut in half by the slammed door.

I drove immediately to an ATM. The interior of the car was suddenly as hot as a swamp, and I began to feel as if I were drowning in my own shame. *No good deed*, I thought. But I hadn't done a good deed. I hadn't done anything. As I sped through the streets I wondered why I hadn't just offered her the money. The truth is I didn't trust her story. I didn't trust anyone's story. But my mistrust had made me cruel. Cowardly. It could have been a scam, a long game of guilt until the mark coughs up the cash. Or she was telling the truth and was too embarrassed to ask a stranger for money. It didn't matter anymore because the cost of me being wrong was a woman and her child would be spending the night on the street.

I pulled forty dollars from the teeth of the machine and sped back to where I had dropped the mother and child off. I ran a red light, and took a corner too hard but there weren't any cars to crash into. The rain began to fall in ropes again, rolling over the windshield and I cursed myself for buying the cheap wiper-blades. Even with my chin near the top of the steering wheel I still couldn't see well. I peered through the foggy, water streaked windshield and drove slowly past the rooming house. The mother and daughter were gone.

I circled the neighborhood for some time looking for them. I passed a police SUV, one big wheel up on the sidewalk, its spotlight on an old man crouched in the rain, crowded in by grocery bags. He tugged at his beard and lectured to the air, while a scowling policeman, his shoulders darkening from light blue to navy and his hat encased in a sort of shower cap, watched me suspiciously. I saw a wide car stopped along the road, headlights burning, two people talking in the front seat. A girl asleep in the back? I drove past slowly trying to see in, but there were only the suggestions of faces. I kept driving around. I watched the houses for signs of life. Nothing but boarded up doorways and razor slit screens. Gleaming white signs stapled on porch fronts.

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WILL PROSECUTE

I pulled up in front of the rooming house again and turned off the engine. Inside the car the windows started to cloud over, revealing the hidden marks of my former passengers. A drawing, on the backseat window, of a snake or a worm. The bean-shaped print of a forehead on the front passenger side. I stepped out of the car and let the rain hit me. It was as cold as well water, and smelled metallic. I walked toward the front door of the rooming house then paused there at the bottom of the stoop with the money clenched in my fist. There was a steel chain wrapped around the knob and a padlock. An orange notice that had already begun to wither away stated that the building was condemned.

A figure emerged from the next doorway, and for a second my heart lifted, but when he stepped into the light I could see it was an old man. He shambled forward and

held out one trembling hand, the other held a battered unlit cigarette which he kept close to his chest to protect it from the rain. The cigarette looked ancient, as if he had been hoarding it for the perfect moment.

"Hey there young man, I just need eighty-five cents to get me a bus ticket and get out of this rain," he said, his voice bubbly with phlegm. "Can you help me out?"

I looked at the forty dollars in my hand, now soaked by the rain and beginning to disintegrate. I handed him a twenty.

"Oh God bless you young man, God bless you. Jesus loves you young man," he said.

"Can I get one of those?" I said pointing at his cigarette. The old man looked at me for a moment as if he didn't understand, then began to recede back into the darkness.

"God bless you, young man. Jesus loves you," he said.

Security Measures

Elda was told to sit in the recliner which had been dragged directly in front of the television set. It was John's old chair, now well within the circle of radiation poisoning, damaged retinas and all else she used to warn her children about. Her daughter, Casey, was busy behind the set, jerking at wires and cussing, her big butt trembling with frustration. Elda avoided looking at her daughter's rump by staring down at the worn place on the wine colored carpeting where her boys used to sit and watch Saturday morning cartoons. The two of them—Irish twins and almost every bit alike as if the year between them meant nothing at all—had the habit of throwing bouncy balls against the screen. The sound drove Elda crazy. Floor to screen and back against the meat of their palms. *Thud, dink, slap*. Bowls of blue cereal milk balanced in each lap.

She'd start to scream at them but John would hold up his hand in that sage way he had. He'd blow his cigarette smoke and say to the boys, "Drink your milk or you're gonna be short forever." The boys would then immediately stop their playing and slurp with milk running from the corners of their mouths. When they were done they'd gaze up at their father with expectant eyes as if they should shoot up five feet in height. Elda was always amazed at the way the kids would believe any damn thing John said, when she would've gotten nothing but back talk. Those boys would've drunk bleach if John told them to.

Casey got up from behind the TV, swiped her hair back, and stood before her mother with a large remote control. Casey then tried to hand the remote to Elda, but she just stared at the thing as if her daughter were passing her a tarantula.

"Come on Ma, don't be like that. It ain't gonna bite ya," Casey said, and then under her breath as if Elda couldn't hear, "Ever since she quit I fucking swear. Have a goddamn cigarette if it makes you halfway decent." Elda ignored this. She held the new TV remote and examined it. She had had the same remote for nearly ten years, had grown attached to it, and now this stupid thing. It felt like it could break at any moment. She turned the thing over and studied its backside. A rectangular piece of clear tape peeled jaggedly at the edges.

MADE IN VIETNAM

For fucksake. Elda rolled her eyes and sighed.

"Look Ma, all you got to do is press this button. See it there, no wait, see, you've got it flipped over. You're looking at the wrong side," Casey said. She grabbed the remote, flipped it over and handed it back. "When someone comes knocking at your door, I don't care who it is, I want you to check'em out on the TV first. All you gotta do is press this button." Elda scoffed. Casey bent down beside her. She placed her hand on her mother's arm. "Really Ma. This way is just easier," she said. "We're just trying to keep you safe."

Elda patted her daughter's hand, but she was skeptical. She then glanced over her shoulder at the front door. The sliding lock was installed by her husband and was the only security she needed up until recently. The chain lock, and two deadbolts were both installed by Casey's husband Bradley, a large man who carried around such a look of pained bewilderment on his face as to appear to be suffering from a series of electrical

shocks given remotely every few seconds. He had just finished wiring the closed circuit camera above the front door and was now pacing on the porch, his shadow moving over the window like a sentry. Elda truly wasn't sure if she was meant to be living in a fort or a prison.

The chain lock went in after her incident with the salesman. He came knocking at her door early enough he could have been the mailman and Elda, expecting a package that day, came trotting from the kitchen. She opened the door a crack and seeing it wasn't the mailman began closing it again, but the strange man wedged one of his pointy shoes between the door and the frame.

"Hello Miss, how are ya?" he said quickly. Elda peeked through the crack and saw him tip his hat. There was desperation in his face. Though he was smiling, it appeared as if he were struggling to lift the corners of his mouth. His briefcase slid through the opening with its tattered edges. He squeezed his head through the door like a balloon forced between two fence posts. He bent the rim of his hat, and set it straight on his head with a garishly ringed hand.

"Sorry ma'am. Just a minute of your time," he said.

When she finally let him in he cracked his neck and grinned with crooked coffee stained teeth. His mustache was like a dog brush. He smelled like the interior of an old car, all mildew and stale cigarette smoke with a hint of dry chemical sweetness that must have been Febreze. He had recently been rained on, she could tell because his shoulders were damp, but as far as she knew it hadn't rained yet that day. She bought a two-year subscription to Forbes magazine to rid herself of that man and his smell. It was an expense she could not account for in her budget, and Casey made such a fuss.

The deadbolts were a whole other story. Maybe a month had passed after the incident with the salesman when Elda, returning from an impromptu trip to the grocery store, found her front door standing wide open. It was early in the evening but the house was already under a sheet of darkness as if hiding in shame. She waited on the stone path that led to her front porch with a plastic sack of blood oranges in her left hand. It wasn't fear exactly that stopped her from going inside. She felt as if she'd accidentally come upon the wrong house, or the house that was once hers had somehow changed. She glanced about. The neighbor's houses filed west like a line of giant game pieces. They retained their aura of suburban complacency, while her own home had molted its skin and became some new animal.

Elda turned back to where the bus had dropped her off. She remembered the woman in the red sandals with the teeth like candy corn. The woman spoke about the Mexicans at the grocery store, because she had stood near them in the check out line and knew Elda had also seen them. How rude the man was, she said, but the little girl was so precious with her curls and colorful dress. Elda then told the woman in the red sandals about the salesman. The woman scoffed, then leaned forward conspiratorially.

"Was he black?" she said. Elda thought about this. The man was tan, as if he slept outdoors during the day, but he was definitely a white man. His briefcase had a brass nameplate that read Hershel Steinhoff. Elda didn't believe that was his name. Certainly it wasn't the name he used when he introduced himself later, though upon recalling the incident she couldn't exactly remember the name he had used. He had said so many things, and it all seemed to come out at once. After a moment Elda said, "I believe he was white." The woman looked disappointed.

"Can't even trust the white man anymore. Did he have an accent?" she said. Elda shook her head. "You better look out. These Romanians. They been coming over here by the butt load. What they do, one knocks on your front door while the others sneak in the back," the woman said. Elda had never met a Romanian. She didn't even know where Romania might be.

"Did they do this to you?" Elda said, genuinely concerned.

"Naw, they know I'm packing," the woman said then got up for her stop. She paused and put her hand on Elda's. "You should get a gun," she said. Elda did own several hunting rifles that belonged to her husband. They were now moldering away in the basement, except for the shotgun she presumed was still in the hall closet.

Elda entered her house and peeked up at the ceiling. She had the fleeting thought that someone had come in and tore out the structural framework of her home, leaving just the thin shell of drywall and all-weather siding to collapse on her head. She called out but heard no reply. It was like walking into a hotel room for the first time. An immaculate and empty space that still teemed with something. What was it? A breathing, living feeling. The warmth of a space just vacated. The smell of breath. As she stood still, listening, a strange smothering silence stuck to everything. When she moved again she noticed how the old carpet crackled.

Elda immediately regretted calling Casey. It would have been better not to have said anything. Whoever had broken into the house was gone. Nothing had been stolen. Nothing worth noticing at least. When she did call, Casey did exactly what Elda did not want her to do, she started shouting, *Nine, one, one! Nine, one, one!* As if Elda had forgotten the number.

Later that night Casey and her husband arrived. Bradley moved slowly. He had sustained an injury to his back some time ago, and now bent over like an old man. Bradley used to be funny, but now he was listless and far away. He always came wearing his tool belt that jangled when he shifted his weight, carrying his toolbox that rattled with too many tools for the job in one hand and the clinking six-pack in the other. Casey observed him from afar as he worked, complaining all the time about having to get up early and the kids being alone. Bradley just kept working. He knew as well as Elda that there was no point in arguing with her daughter. Casey was bound by duty, or guilt, to do these things. Elda's two son's didn't have any input. Whatever Casey did, they threw their money behind. Michael was living on the west coast, and Trey was still up in the northeast. They couldn't be bothered with the details.

Elda paced the room, stewing as the house was filled with the squeaking of the drill bit. When Bradley was done he gave Elda a dry kiss on the cheek, his breath sweet with cheap beer. He was unemployed, that's why he had so much time to do these jobs around Elda's house. She felt sorry for him, but at the same time she felt like he was weak. A failure. It was a motherly instinct to be so critical. She flashed Bradley a harsh look, but he seemed to not notice. He handed her the new keys on a ring with a yellow rubber fish attached to it. Elda couldn't help saying what was on her mind.

"You know, if you got a job she wouldn't be fussing all the time," Elda said. Bradley paused before the door. His shoulders rose and fell. "You can't imagine the stress that puts on a mother, having to work the way she does."

"I know it El," he said and shuffled away. Elda stood by the door as he crossed the lawn. Casey was already out in the truck, sullenly playing on her phone, the light from the screen lighting up her face.

At one of the Friday night dinners with Casey and her family Elda theorized about the incident. There must have been a reason for someone to break into her home. Casey and Bradley averted their eyes as she mused. She knew that they were sharing some secret pity among themselves, that they talked about her like she was some kind of nut. Elda didn't care. The dinners were dull affairs anyway. Her grandkids, Helen and Ethan, were sweet but dumb as rocks and always had their heads in their damn video games, even at the table. Casey never had anything positive to say. She was always worrying about money and this and that, and Bradley was too busy sucking down beer.

To Elda's surprise Helen got interested in the topic and put down her smartphone. She and Elda began throwing back and forth possible scenarios.

"Maybe they wanted your jewels to hock on the black market," Helen suggested. Elda dismissed the notion with a wave of her naked hand.

"Maybe they wanted Grandpa's guns," Elda said. "Some of them are worth quite a bit."

"Maybe they were looking for children to kidnap and hold for ransom," Helen said and grabbed her brother around the neck and put a finger gun to his temple. "Or they were terrorists," she said as Ethan struggled away.

"Maybe they were cannibals," the boy said getting in on the fun.

"I heard on the news that there's these people break into homes to steal pills," Elda said. Casey huffed.

“Mom, can we please talk about something else,” she said. Bradley got up and went to the kitchen. Elda remembered then that her medicine cabinet was open that night, though nothing was missing.

“I don’t keep nothin in there but some Tums and hemorrhoid cream,” Elda said. The children grimaced and stuck out their tongues. “I still got some of that medication they prescribed after my hip surgery though, but they’re all in my nightstand.” The pills made Elda sick to her stomach, so she didn't take most of them. Elda shook her head at the thoughtlessness of hoarding such irresistible bait. “I ought to get rid of that stuff.” Bradley came back with another beer and looked at Elda. His brow was damp. He pulled out his chair and sat down heavily.

“The kids don’t need to be hearing all this,” Casey said.

"Most violent crimes are committed by someone the victim knew," Helen said with the blunt authority of an expert.

"Where'd you hear that?" Casey said. Helen shrugged.

"SVU," she said and picked up her phone again.

As far as Elda knew there was no specific event that instigated the installation of a closed circuit camera. When Casey arrived with the big blue box, she smiled and said it would give everybody piece of mind. When Elda resisted Casey said she couldn't return the camera so that was that. She probably bought the damn thing off the internet. Somebody really got one over on her. She never was too bright. That husband of hers, cagey as he was now, he was probably out fooling around with some waitress, and yet Elda was the

one that needed observation. She was the one who needed to be shut in from the world.

Ha!

"Try it out," Casey said good heartedly, as if the thing were some new fun toy. Elda nodded and pushed the button. The TV screen revealed her front porch; a wind swept square of concrete shaded by a small roof. The wind chimes tangled into themselves. The American flag wrapped around its pole. Out on the sun scorched lawn Bradley pressed a beer bottle on his lower back. What a view.

"It works," Casey said. She kissed her mother and headed toward the door. "Okay Ma, bye, I'll see you tomorrow," she said. Elda supposed aloud that it was generous of them to have taken such security measures.

"I should be flattered, ya'll wanting me around a while longer," Elda said. Casey smiled and looked as if she might cry. Behind her the summer evening buzzed and clicked like a cooling engine. The tepid wet air crept through the door into the cool house and reached Elda's bare shoulder.

"Shut the door, you're letting the air out," Elda said.

After Casey was gone Elda watched the image of her empty porch for a moment, but it began to make her feel lonely, and angry, annoyed by the tangled chimes and the dead plants. She pushed the button on the remote again and the image shrunk instantly, leaving only a white dot that remained at the center of the screen for a while before fading away.

Elda shifted in the recliner, trying to find a comfortable position. She preferred the couch with its green still as vivid as the day she bought it. Keeping the blinds closed all those beautiful days had paid off. The pattern of flying mallards diving over the cushions

and climbing up the arm rests were so brilliantly detailed. John never liked the pattern. She had bought it for him. He was the duck hunter after all. He hollered at her when he came home from a business trip to discover the new furniture. He didn't like how much money she had spent. But the little bit of wine—now hidden on the flip side of the far left cushion—wouldn't come out. She couldn't return it and that just made him angrier. He said she did it on purpose. She was glad the kids weren't there at the time, but now she didn't feel the same. The way the children revered their father. She wished they could've seen him that day. The way he quibbled over money.

John never liked her sitting in that recliner, and she had continued to respect this fact after he died, some years ago now, and even in this moment she felt the urge to get up. She leaned against the armrest to lift herself, but she paused staring down at the blue tray table. Sitting on top was a stack of ancient TV Guides, and on top of those an ash tray with the red letters TWA printed there with a few soft flakes of ash. Elda frowned remembering her days as a ticket agent. The short-lived desire she had to become a stewardess, or what's it, a flight attendant, and fly off to other lands, places she never got to see because she got pregnant with Casey. John made her quit just a few weeks into the pregnancy, and she was left at home.

Elda was lonely and bored for a while, then came the hijackings in the late 70's, just before Trey was born, and she felt lucky to be safe at home drinking milkshakes and knitting. When it seemed like planes were falling out of the sky left and right in the 80's and 90's she was attending baseball games and dropping off van loads of kids at the arcade. When they dive bombed New York, over a decade ago now, Casey was already married, the boys were in college, and Elda was busy enjoying the quiet house. She

remembered the panic in Trey's voice when he called that day from his dorm room at Syracuse. Elda was able to calm him with the assurance of a simpler world that still existed if he ever wanted to come back. Their town was far away from the craziness that seemed to infect the world. There was a time when that seemed true.

The grooves John left in the recliner's seat poked into Elda's backside. She adjusted herself and the chair creaked. She closed her eyes. The hours John spent in the recliner during his later years were captured in its scent. The looming aroma of smoke. The sweet soap he used after working in the garage. The orange stuff with the gritty texture to it. He would come here and watch TV. He liked Letterman. Elda distrusted the comedian's politics so she would go to bed and hear John through the closed bedroom door. His heaving laughs that devolved into dry coughing fits. The memory made her sleepy. She jerked the wooden lever on the side of the recliner. With a scrape and a sharp ping the footrest sprung forth and lifted her ankles.

Elda started to doze, and she saw in her mind Mr. Orf. She hadn't thought of him in a long time. He was a farmer whose fields used to reach the county border. John bought the house on the far edge of his land in 1975. Orf had originally built the house for his growing family, but his wife had died in an accident and he had not remarried. The old man had taken to their children though. He let the boys chase his chickens and ride on the tractor. Casey would sun herself on a quilt thrown over the tall grass. Elda remembered her long legs. How precarious they seemed, so vulnerable. But John would insist, *leave them*, and they would have their alone time in the cool house. The nearest neighbors were three miles away.

Then Mr. Orf died. The rest of his land was auctioned off. The city came to pave the gravel road and widen its reach. Elda could see the process running in her mind like a sped-up movie. Years flying by so that it was almost comical. The rumble of trucks that brought the steaming tar and the men in orange vests and spattered boots, shovels resting on their shoulders or patting down the fresh asphalt, their heads bowed over the new road that would bring more men and machines that would claw up the fields and grind up the apple trees, then trucks with bellies full of cement that would be poured and smoothed and set, followed by long trucks stacked with lumber and yet more men with yellow plastic hats and coffee mugs and large sheets of blue paper, there to piece together with bolts and screws and nails the skeletal frames that would be bricked up and finally snuff out her clear view.

Elda awoke with a start. She had heard something. A thud. She was sure of it. She turned and leaned on the armrest to scowl at the door. The windows were dark. She looked around for the remote.

Piece of junk.

Where was it? She scanned the floor.

God damn piece of junk.

She fell back into the chair and groped for the remote in the folds of her pant legs. She found it deep between the cushion and the armrest. She lifted the device, pointed it at the TV and pressed the button. Nothing but static and snow.

God damn it. Of course it don't work.

She changed the channel to her favorite news station. A man she had never seen before appeared on the screen before a digital projection of an American flag snapping silently in a stiff, persistent wind. The pundit's face was pink against his neatly cut blonde hair. He was chubby in the way her husband was in high school, though this man appeared to be much older than that. The man leaned forward. Elda was taken by the earnest shimmer in his eyes. She could see the neckline of a neatly pressed suit. The bulbous knot of a red, white, and blue tie. Elda thought he looked like a God fearing man, a Mormon maybe. She was confused about the Mormon beliefs, the multiple wives and all that, but she knew they were good people at heart. Faithful people.

"Are you ready to be that person you were once? The person you were meant to be," he said. "If our country is to be restored you are the secret. *You* are the answer."

Elda glanced over her shoulder again. A shadow moved along the window sill, but the man was speaking again so she turned back to the TV.

"Do you remember the way things were when you were a child? So much more innocent. Pure. People were good. People had values. They had virtues to follow. A system of beliefs. In faith. In country. In themselves. That guided them, but now..." he narrowed his eyes but still held his possessive gaze. "That world doesn't exist for our children. And those pigs wallowing in the swamp of our so called Capitol have the audacity to say that we must give hand outs to those who are not willing to work for this country. Those who don't even belong here." His countenance shattered and he broke his stare. He looked off camera a moment as if he were about to cry and couldn't bare the shame of it. Elda searched for his eyes in the screen. She wanted to stroke his cheek.

"I'm sorry," he said, showing the pink palm of his right hand. "I just love my country. And I fear for it. Everyday I fear for it, and I know you too fear for it. We see that they are trying to take the best country in the world. The greatest gift God has ever given man on the face of this Earth. They want to run it into the ground. All that it stands for. All that it was to us when we were children. When America was great."

Grief gripped Elda's throat. It felt all encompassing. The man was silent. He looked away for a moment and Elda felt as if they had shared the vision of her distant past. Then she heard what sounded like steps on the back porch. Elda felt weighted to her chair, like her body was suddenly magnetized and stuck to the recliner's metal skeleton.

"The fall of our great country is imminent," the man said. He looked pained. "We are bound to fail if we chain ourselves to the steadily sinking rock that is blind idealism. If we prop up the lazy and weak we will also become lazy and weak. If we allow outsiders to flood in from every crack we will soon be drowned in them. Soon we will be the outsiders. Soon we will be shut out of our own homes. Soon we will be shunned from our towns." He clenched his fists and they appeared before his face like two white boxing mitts. "We have to take back our country and we have to take it back by force. We have been silent too long. Our pride has been set aside for others who do not share our values. We sat idly by as we lost our freedoms, one by one. Our virtues that have been bent, ever so slowly and oh so methodically that we didn't even notice when they finally broke. We may have been lulled to sleep with the sweet songs of slick politicians, now we are awake and angry and we want back everything they have taken away from us. Every little snip they have taken out of our picture of America. Our picture of freedom. And I say to you. You who now remembers. I say now is the time to take back our country."

Elda stood up. The recliner sprung forward and lurched back with a thud. She held her fists clenched and close to her sides. Her thin lips sneering. Her teeth gritting. Elda turned to meet the intruder. She heard the porch door sliding open. A hunched shadow moved through the dark kitchen, then stopped and straightened, eyes glinting dully in the light of the television.

“Well, well, well,” Elda said. Bradley stepped forward into the dim light of the living room. His face was taut, as if his skeleton was about to burst through his skin. “I should’ve seen this coming,” Elda said and put her hands on her hips. Bradley moved toward her, but would not look Elda in the eyes. He cracked his big knuckles. “If it’s money you’re looking for Bradley all you would have to do is ask. You needn’t be stealing from your own mother in law.” Bradley didn’t answer. His shadow fell over Elda, and when he was close enough Elda had a sudden flash of empathy. A recognition of what she had seen in his eyes so many times before but could not name.

“You’re in such pain,” she said. Elda reached for her son in law’s face, but he was so close he blocked out the overhead light and it was like reaching into a black hole.

Orange Beach

Paul laid the last of the palm fronds over the hole he had dug in the sand, then stood back to inspect his work. A hot wind swept over the beach and lifted the edge of the dry leaves like fingers reaching up from a shallow grave. Paul bent over, scooped up a handful of sand and pebbles and scattered it over the palm fronds. He stepped back again, hands on his hips. A tiny crab, like a cocktail cherry with legs, scuttled across the surface. His trap set, Paul plopped down on the blanket and waited for Frank to bring him a fresh Mai Tai. He trembled with giddiness. Paul could predict Frank's every move. Frank was simple, a sucker, and country as hell. Frank would always play the game, and Frank would always lose.

Back at the beach house, Frank struggled to balance the drinks as he shouldered open the screen door and stepped onto the porch. Young Harris—skinny and tan legged, barely clothed as usual—was busy inside fixing more snacks. Frank stumbled down the uneven steps to the sand then called to Paul for help, but his voice was lost under the buzz of a passing biplane dragging behind it a long vinyl tail that rippled in the wind. Frank stopped and looked up. It was the same advertisement he had seen every year since he and Paul first started coming to the Gulf together some ten years ago. *Pink Pony Pub Happy Hour Every Hour*. He grimaced at the thought of how much time he had spent in that bar,

eating soggy hush puppies and spitting margaritas at kids walking by on the beach below its splintering party deck. The plane veered off from its path, and circled back over the water toward the bank of hotels that lined Orange Beach.

When the sound of the plane faded to a distant hum, Frank called out to Paul again.

“Baby, how ‘bout a little help?” he said. Paul turned and waved from his spot on the beach. He grinned in that stupid innocent way he always did when he was up to something, like a kid who had just taped a firecracker to a frog. "What a gentleman," Frank snorted and hurried forward, not caring anymore how much he spilled. Occupied as he was with the surety he would finally tell Paul what he thought about Harris, he never even questioned the fallibility of the ground beneath his feet. He stepped right into Paul's trap, tossing the drinks into the sand and twisting his ankle.

After Frank retreated to the bedroom, slinging his silly curses as he limped through the sand, Paul took refuge from the sun in one of the two lounge chairs on the white clapboard porch of the beach house. He cleaned his pistol—an old .38 he stole off a cute, dumb cop back in 1981—with care. When he was done he set the cleaning kit aside and reloaded the cylinder.

Paul's denim shorts were damp from digging in the sand, and he had put on his "Gulf Shirt," a red short sleeve button up decorated with coconuts and hula dancers and white birds. He left the shirt unbuttoned so the breeze could slip around his waist and he stretched his long legs which were still taut and smooth as those of a much younger man, though the bottoms of his feet were worn and yellow. Harris came out of the house with

fresh drinks and a plate of crackers and cheese. Paul tucked the gun in the waistband of his shorts and took his glass. Harris sat in a fold up beach chair, the woven plastic seat crackling underneath his weight, and looked at Paul's feet with what Paul translated as morbid fascination.

"Don't look at my feet, Harris," Paul said and draped a towel over his toes. He took some of the crackers and began munching.

"Why'd the Princess go to bed?" Harris said. Paul shrugged.

"To nurse his wounds," Paul said. He pushed the paper umbrella aside with his nose and sipped his drink. Harris lit a cigarette, inhaled, then blew the smoke toward the ceiling fan. Paul frowned and waved away the wafting tendrils of smoke. He was a man keen on physical upkeep, and he was aware of the damaging effects smoke could have on the skin.

"Could you please?" he said. Harris frowned, then stood and leaned on one of the porch columns away from Paul.

"What happened?" Harris said looking down on Paul in the lounge chair. Paul squinted at the boy as if he were a glaring beacon of goodness, though in reality the afternoon sun was coming down just under the porch overhang behind Harris, and the spears of light stabbed Paul's alcohol battered brain. He laid back again and sighed. He was so hungover his teeth ached, but it felt good in a way. He hadn't had a night like last night in years. Harris had wanted to party and Paul indulged him, matching him drink for drink, and foolishly overtipping the bartenders. He had flashed his money and possibly made himself a target. Paul wasn't particularly concerned with Frank's feelings at this time.

"So, you hurt him?" Harris said.

"Maybe his pride," Paul said. He looked up at the porch fan which had not moved in a long time. The blades sagged toward the floor. When Paul noticed Harris was still staring at him he said, "He's old. Whiny and old. No fun at all anymore."

"You hurt him though," Harris said,

"All I did was dig a hole," Paul said.

"You knew what would happen," Harris said. Paul guessed that he did, but didn't admit as much. There was equal opportunity for Frank to turn and go another way instead of stepping straight into his trap. Paul took a long thoughtful sip of his drink, then set the glass on the floor.

"A man should look twice before he takes a step," Paul said. He put his hands behind his head. Harris glared. "Come on, it was just a joke," Paul said and winked. Harris ignored him.

"Hey, you said you wanted to learn how to shoot. We could drive up to Mobile if you want, hit the range," Paul said and yanked the gun out of his shorts again. Harris glanced at the gun, then mournfully cast his eyes over the stretch of sand that led to the beach. Paul supposed the boy's bad mood was because he hadn't let him swim in the last screaming hours of the previous night's festivities. Harris was already nude when he went running toward the water. Paul had to grab him roughly by the elbow and dragged him back. The boy had fallen, skinned his knee, while Frank stood in the doorway with a malicious smile, giggling to himself. Paul had already explained. The water was poisoned, that's why there were so few tourists. That's why most of the other beach houses were still shuttered for the previous hurricane season. He told Harris all that, but still the boy

pouted as if Paul had been the one who dumped all that stinking oil in the Gulf. Paul was losing his patience, but tried not to let it show.

"All right," Paul said, and sucked in his gut to fit the gun back in its place, the cold stock against his skin. "We could go up to the Pink Pony. Get us a couple of margaritas. It's happy hour every hour," he said and pointed at the biplane which was headed down the beach once again. The engine sputtered, and the plane dipped then turned and headed back over land. Harris raised an eyebrow then looked away. "Okay," Paul said. He pulled his sunglasses down off his forehead and shut his eyes, hoping the boy would go away. Harris flicked the stub of his cigarette into the sand, and pushed smoke out of his nostrils.

"You're an asshole," Harris said and went inside. Paul was unmoved. This was how he had dealt with his son all those years ago, and he expected Harris to have the same kind of tantrum. *But good lord, little Corey must be in his thirties now*, he thought. Corey, red-headed and dimpled like his mother. A whimpering Cabbage Patch doll. It was funny how people could stay in your mind just the way you last saw them. His mother called Paul weak, and used the boy as proof. The wilting nature of his seed. The genetic fallacy that Paul had carried on through her. Her anger was understandable, but then again Paul had his own anger to deal with.

Sitting up on the bed Frank balanced a baggy full of crushed ice on his ankle. He ran his tongue over the front of his teeth. The grit of sand was still there and once again the heat of humiliation and rage burned through him. Frank fantasized about stealing the car. Paul could finally be alone with Harris; that's what he wanted anyway. Frank didn't drive

but he knew basically how it worked. Press the gas and go. The motto of America.

Though he had twisted his right ankle and that would make things tricky. He lifted the ice bag and winced more at the sight than the pain. His ankle was definitely swollen, and a bit bluish. At least he had convinced Paul to get rid of that ratty old Mini. It was a stick shift. He wouldn't get far in the Mini.

Frank stroked the crest of his tender belly, red and peeling from the sun. His bald head was burnt too and still felt as if he could fry a whole catfish on his scalp. He laid back on the cool pillows and looked up at the painting hung on the wall above the headboard. A smooth bodied dolphin, eternally youthful, arced through a spray of mist and light. He remembered a show he saw on Animal Planet. Dolphins being hunted by a great white as they played in the surf, seemingly unaware. But the dolphins ganged up on the shark, flipped him over and drowned him. It was a thrilling revelation.

Frank called for Harris. The boy came into the room carrying a silver tray. The tray held a tinkling glass of iced Kaluha and the bottle, just as Frank ordered. The boy's demeanor changed after Frank hobbled through the kitchen and up to the bedroom. Was he surprised that Paul could do such a cruel thing? Maybe he was just stupid. Harris brooded like a lovelorn teenager. How old was he anyway? Frank didn't know. Anybody under thirty looked like a baby to him. He couldn't blame Harris for being in love with Paul. Frank was about the same age when it happened to him. He just wished someone had told him different.

Harris knew how to drive, maybe Frank could convince him to steal the car. Harris might not know it, but Frank would be doing him a favor. They could leave Paul behind in this moldy old beach house and drive back to New Orleans. Paul would be fine

on his own; Alabama was his home, he knew people here. He had a month's supply of liquor and God knows he didn't eat anything but pistachios and jerky. Frank never felt like he belonged anywhere, especially not Orange Beach. Maybe he wouldn't go back to New Orleans. Maybe he'd go North. Somewhere cold. Some place he could wear layers. Hide the tattoos and the scars. The colder the climate the less likely Paul would come after him. Frank would be fair and only take his share of the money when he left.

"Paul's too old to keep up with you. You're gonna put him in an early grave," Frank said. Harris paused as if waiting for direction. Frank looked the boy up and down. He had finally put on clothes and looked almost modest, though he was still barefoot. He wore a sheer white button-up shirt with pockets on each breast and blue drawstring pants, both of which were Paul's. He resembled a concierge at a tropical hotel, and after he placed the glass and bottle on the nightstand he stood for another moment as if waiting for a tip. Frank smiled. Harris blushed and turned to leave. Frank knew the boy was too good to abandon Paul. Even if he did all sorts of things you wouldn't expect a good boy to do he wouldn't do a thing like that.

"Thank you," Frank said. Harris stopped, turned and nodded. Frank sat up. "Harris, I think we got off on the wrong foot. Really, thank you, I appreciate it," he said. Harris looked serious for a moment, then smiled.

"Whatever," Harris said. He stopped and looked down as if someone just put a knife in his foot.

"Help me get him back," Frank said. The boy frowned.

"What do you mean?" Harris said.

"He likes to play games. I want to play a trick on him, just like he did me," Frank said. He swung his legs around and put both feet on the floor. He gingerly tested his ankle.

Harris looked befuddled. *God, he is a little dim isn't he?* Frank thought. In the face Harris resembled a mink; his dark eyes close together, his spare black whiskers, his sun browned face, and his round ears that stuck out of his head like jug handles. What it was Paul had seen in him Frank wasn't sure.

"Run a bath, then go down to the kitchen and get me a bottle of Grenadine," Frank said. The boy continued to stare. "Trust me, it'll be funny," Frank said.

"Funny," Harris said blankly. Frank nodded. He grabbed his glass of Kaluha and gulped it like milk. A vein of the creamy liqueur streamed down his chin and splashed on his belly. God, when had he gotten so fat? He shooed Harris away.

"It'll be a riot. Go, go, go, before he gets too drunk," he said.

Was there anything better than tequila and ginger beer? Paul certainly doubted it. It didn't require the fuss Harris put into scraping lemons and pounding sugars. He would need a refill soon, but he was glad Harris had gone off to sulk. He was certainly capable of making his own drink. Simplicity. That's all he ever wanted. Even when he and Frank were running amok across the south, robbing payday loan businesses and liquor stores, it was the quiet moments he longed for. The times they were held up in a motel for weeks, making love and watching HBO, or down here at Orange Beach where they would booze like kings and piss their names in the sand. Why then had he gone and complicated things?

Paul and Frank had moved to New Orleans to retire and waste the remainder of their days fixing up a bar in Mid-City that Paul had bought for cheap. From day one he began to feel restless. The work was nasty, and Paul got sick from the mold. Then he heard the story from a man who had lived in the neighborhood before Katrina. Three men were shot in that bar. They were trying to steal whatever wasn't bolted down, and the owner caught them. He executed the three men and left their bodies to the rising water. The police found the bodies later, tangled together and caked in mud at the back of the stock room. The owner disappeared. The story haunted Paul. Not because of the deaths. Paul felt as though the desperation of the men, murderer and his victims alike, had glommed to his bones. When Harris appeared, as miraculous as a lost balloon, Paul reached out and grabbed him by the string.

Paul gazed over the beach that led to the placid surface of the Gulf. The green bushels of seaweed billowed delicately at the surface of the water, then became jumbled up in the cresting waves. The not so subtle stink of desiccating fish crept low along the sand, carried up to the porch by the shifting breeze. A bone white crane stepped languidly over the dead fish, not bothering to even prod at them with his long beak. The bird took a few quick steps and lifted off toward Mexico. Following the path of the crane Paul fancied he saw a sheen, a shimmering rainbow way out on the surface of the water. The faint smell of gasoline. A speedboat nodded over the waves. A man stood at the back and fiddled with the motor while a small woman hung her arms over the side, her hands hidden in the dark water.

The screen door whacked against the wall and Harris stepped out onto the porch.

“Something’s wrong with the Princess,” Harris said.

"What is it?" Paul said.

Harris shrugged and lit a cigarette. Paul noticed a splotch of red on the hem of Harris' white button up shirt and felt a fluttering in his chest. Harris sneered and blew smoke down at the older man.

Frank heard the screech and clatter of the screen door. The heavy footed Paul thumped through the kitchen below. The sound reverberated through the water in the tub and rattled the toothbrushes in their rack. Frank had to admit that he was getting a thrill out of all this. Finally Paul would be the butt of the joke.

Frank closed his eyes, trying to look dead. *Too tight*, he thought, so he relaxed a bit, made his jaw slack. No, he would open his eyes. When a person died in front of you their gaze continued, and even if the head didn't fall limp or the mouth didn't gape open dramatically, something went out of the eyes that told you they were dead. He had seen it many times, but still couldn't wrap his mind around what it was exactly. The look. Seeing and then not seeing. It wasn't a thousand mile stare. It was as if a white placard had been placed right in front of their nose. The sliding down of a box office shade. *Nothing left to see here*. A kind of blindness, but no, different from blindness because with a blind person the eyes still searched for something. No way he could pull that off. Frank turned toward the wall so Paul wouldn't see his eyes and hoped the sight of the grenadine-blood would be convincing enough to give him a scare.

Paul ran on his heels, so the sound of him coming up the stairs and in the hall was like a pirate knocking around on peg legs. There was the lighter sound of Harris behind him, like a skittering dog. Paul called out to Frank. He was in the bedroom now. Frank

smiled, and stared at the seashell tiles where the wall met the lip of the tub. He slid down a little lower into the water. Paul fell into the doorframe. He called Frank's name again, his voice loose in the air, uncertain and weak. Frank imagined Paul frozen there aghast, like a bad actor in those boring black and white movies he watched. Frank stifled his laughter. Should he reveal himself? No, he wanted Paul to get closer so he could give him a real shock. But strange sounds came from Paul; a squeak, then rapid wheezing. Frank rolled over in the tub and grinned wide. He saw Paul leaned against the sink.

"Gotcha," Frank said. Paul clawed at himself as if something were trying to burst out of his chest. "Pauly?" Frank said. Paul fell to his knees. His eyes wide and furious, trembling as he stared at Frank, then he fell face first onto the bath mat.

Frank scrambled to get out of the tub. The excessive amount of syrup he had smeared around the rim made the surface so slick he had a hard time lifting himself. He slipped. A bar of soap hit him on the shoulder then plunked into the tub. The shampoo bottle bounced off the small of his back and slapped on the surface of the red water. Frank jammed his knee against the faucet. He put too much weight on his bad ankle, fell forward and knocked his wide forehead on the toilet, then sprawled over Paul in a heap.

Paul struggled to pull in short breaths, pain tearing through his left arm into his chest. He was buried under a mound of moist flesh, smothered by a pungent sour smell. With one last heave he was able to push Frank's body aside and roll onto his back. He lay there for a moment, then glanced over at Frank. Globbs of red snailed down Frank's bare ass.

"Frank?" he said, but his voice was dim, barely any air behind it. Frank didn't answer, but Paul could see he was breathing. Paul heard papers flapping like frightened

birds in the bedroom. "Harris?" he said, a faded whisper. He stared up at the ceiling. The paint festered around the jaundiced light fixture. Then his vision was eclipsed by the brown face and satellite ears of Harris.

"Oh, hello," Harris said. Paul scowled up at him. "Is this like a heart attack or something?" Harris said. Paul nodded desperately. He reached a hand out to the boy. Harris stared down at Paul for a moment. The look on his face was akin to fear—his eyes wide and unblinking, his mouth agape—but then his expression morphed into something more pinched and controlled.

"You know what I want," Harris said, his voice quivering with strange excitement. Paul didn't answer. He couldn't answer. He tried to laugh but it came out as a cough. Paul pulled the gun from his shorts and pointed it at Harris, but his hands were dumb, tingling. He fumbled and the gun clunked to the floor. Harris crouched and seemed to be considering something. He picked up the gun, and stood again looking at it. He didn't point the gun at Paul, but put his finger on the trigger. Harris suddenly seemed much older.

Paul squeezed his eyes shut. He had the troubling sensation that the room was falling away. His limbs tickled like he was lying on the beach, the waves pulling the sand out from under his body bit by bit, burying him at the same time. Paul could hear Harris in the bedroom closet, clothes sliding on their racks, and the dull thud of shoes hitting the floor. Paul opened his eyes again, then turned on his side and prodded at Frank's soft belly.

"Wake up Frank," he said but the words hung on his lips, not wanting to venture any further. His heart was in a paint can shaker. There was an invisible knife between his shoulder blades, pushed down to the hilt. Paul shut his eyes tight again. He had often

imagined the violence of his own death, but it was never like this. He fell under a hail of bullets, or behind the wheel of a car plummeting toward coal colored rocks. He expected death to be external. A force that came to destroy his body. Not from the inside out. Not on the bathroom floor of a timeshare in Orange Beach. When he reopened his eyes he saw Harris close to him, digging in his pockets. Harris grunted with exasperation. He pulled out Paul's wallet and car keys. He opened the wallet and fingered through the few damp bills. He stood up again and looked around the bathroom, then glanced at Frank's still, naked body.

"You think I'm stupid but I ain't," Harris said. Paul tried to sit up, failed. Harris sighed and rolled his eyes, then pointed the gun at the back of Frank's head. "Where is it?" he said. Paul glowered at the boy. Harris pulled the hammer back. "I don't need no target practice from here," he said. Paul pointed emphatically toward the painting of the dolphin. Harris lowered the gun, thanked him and turned away. Paul turned over once more and grabbed at Frank's thigh. He tried to shake him but didn't have the strength. Frank moaned. Harris returned and stood in the doorway, the roll of bills clutched in his left hand and the gun in the other. He lingered there, leaned against the frame. He had a melancholy sort of smile like someone watching a hatchling that has fallen from a high nest, blind and featherless. Nothing to be done. Harris started to leave then paused. He glanced back at Paul.

"It was fun. Thanks, I guess," he said. Paul gave him the finger.

At that moment Paul heard the familiar hiss and snap of the screen door, a key in the door lock. Heavy footsteps in the kitchen directly below. The warm weight of a man's

voice came up through the floor, then a woman singing or complaining, Paul could never tell which.

"You expecting someone?" Harris whispered over his shoulder. He raised the .38. Paul listened to the voices below. It could be the true renters of the timeshare. Mabel, the dimwit caretaker, had told Paul that they'd have a few weeks before the next reservation. Or maybe it was Mabel herself, with one of her dipshit enforcers, looking to squeeze Paul for more cash. Maybe she heard about him throwing around money at the bar with the young boy at his hip. He already gave her five hundred bucks, which was more than he had ever paid for a week in this shit hole. The bitch was getting old, maybe she mixed things up. Then for a second it occurred to Paul that maybe he had allowed himself to settle in, get comfortable again. How long had they actually been at the beach house?

The couple standing in the kitchen below were using soft secretive voices now. Paul knew how to charm his way out of any situation, but he never had the chance to show Harris. It wasn't a skill he could easily teach anyway. Much of it was just common sense. Knowledge about the way people are. The current situation could be resolved by simply saying there was a mixup with the reservation, and they'd go on their way. The people downstairs were most likely innocents, unarmed, and they'd have much invested in the idea that the odd men in their vacation home were just there by mistake. They wouldn't want trouble. But Harris lacked charm. He was all frantic sex and nerves.

Paul then realized his mistake. He had equated Harris and Frank. Harris was a criminal, a clumsy pick pocket looking for drug money. Paul had caught Harris one night on Bourbon Street with a goofy grin on his face and his arm deep inside Paul's coat. Paul had gone and taken him in anyway, promising to bestow upon Harris the amalgam of

skills that had made him a successful thief. Harris had adhered himself to his mentor with a sort of wondrous glee, something Paul thought implied loyalty. Frank on the other hand was a good boy when they met more than a decade ago. A kid living on his daddy's junkyard in Georgia. Too young and stupid to acquire any ambitions of his own. Harris smirked at Paul as if he heard his thoughts. His eyes now like a rattlesnake. He turned away and disappeared into the dark bedroom.

Paul sank further into the deep coolness of the bath mat and slipped into a sort of reverie. A dream. A diner previously lost to the selection of memory, banished by convenience. He was somewhere in Florida, hot and dank. He could feel the stickiness of sweat on his cheeks dried by frigid air conditioning. There was Frank, across from him in the booth. Frank had just accidentally shot a bank teller in the chest—a girl who was so pretty she should have been a model or an actress—and he still had specks of blood clinging to his eyebrows. Outside the window the wailing police cars dodged through traffic. Paul thought they were safest hiding in plain sight, but Frank's state was making him question his own judgement.

The diner was full of blue-hairs. Even the waitress was an old maid. For Paul, who was historically well-liked among servers and a tremendous flirt with both sexes, this was aggravating. The waitress didn't give him more than a cursory glance and responded little to his jokes. Even as Frank struggled to regain his composure across the table—he had screamed like a banshee in the car until Paul slapped him several times, and was still blubbing and sweating through his white cotton shirt, blood previously hidden in the fabric expanding and blurring with the moisture—not one of those old bats seemed concerned.

Paul remembered now, as he lay dying on the bathroom floor, what he attributed back then as a peculiar aspect specific to old people; their closeness to the end made them fail to recognize when death himself sat down in the next booth. At the time, Paul didn't take this fact as a lesson to be applied to his future, or a guarantee that they could in fact hide there successfully. Instead he saw it as a simple opportunity in a string of opportunities. An easy score. Frank had the heels of his hands pressed hard into his eyes, quietly sniffing. Paul attempted to be tender, he guessed how hard it must be to kill someone, but Frank didn't respond. Paul never could stand to be ignored. He pulled the gun from the back of his jeans and pushed it across the table in front of Frank. Paul then stood up and smiled as if addressing a body of constituents.

"All right everybody, this doesn't need to get messy," he said.

When Frank lifted his head his cheek peeled away from the floor. For a moment he thought he was twenty-something again—that was the last time he woke up nude on a bathroom floor covered in something sticky—but when he recognized the hideous salmon colored linoleum he knew exactly where he was. He pulled his arm out from under his belly and poked the wound on his forehead. The pain in his ankle returned and shot up his leg. Frank writhed on the floor for a moment. He rolled over and saw Paul's knobby left knee. The pale purple scar on his left calf muscle.

"Pauly?" Frank said. He inspected Paul's face. His eyes were shut. The high color of a born southerner had drained out of his cheeks. If he hadn't been wearing that terrible shirt and those cut off shorts Frank couldn't have been sure it even was Paul lying

on the bath mat. He had a confused look, devoid of all his characteristic swagger and pomp. Frank felt his neck for a pulse, and found it there, faint and pathetic.

A woman's scream. Three crisp pistol shots in quick succession. A leaden pause. Two more shots, steadier, sure of their marks. A plummeting silence. Frank listened closely for movement in the house. After several minutes he heard the familiar murmurings of a frightened boy reassuring himself. At first Frank thought it was his own voice repeating in his head, but then recognized the particular lisp of Harris. Frank considered calling out—he had the sudden urge to comfort Harris—but thought better of it. He felt compassion, as though the skinny boy was his and Paul's son. Of course that wasn't possible, but he did seem to be made of the same stuff; Paul's capacity for cruelty, and Frank's inability to control it. But there was nothing Frank could say that would reverse the leap Harris had just taken. *We are the same*, Frank thought, but even if that were true, sameness wouldn't save either of them. It was just the opposite. Frank understood that once you killed there wasn't any use in not killing.

Frank eased himself off the floor and limped quietly toward the bedroom. The dolphin painting lay face down on the bed, the hole in the wall exposed, empty. He pulled on a pair of shorts, a t-shirt. Downstairs there was shuffling, a glass shattered. He heard Harris let fly a few vicious curses. On his way down the stairs Frank heard the screen door rattle against the frame, then several quick steps—the slap of bare feet—across the planks of the back porch. Then the footsteps stopped.

When he reached the kitchen Frank saw the twisted feet of a youngish couple just beyond the cheap glass table. He turned away and saw the screen door broken off its

hinges, and Harris on the porch with the gun pointed at someone unseen. Frank picked up a bottle of tequila from the counter.

"You, just," Harris stammered. "You just hold on right there."

Frank came through the doorway silently and moved behind Harris. Standing in the sand, in the sights of Harris' weapon, were two fair-haired boys with similarly oval faces, side by side. Brothers. They were shirtless and wet, having ignored the signs that warned against swimming. Their eyes were as big as silver dollars. The older boy held the little one's hand. Then the older boy glanced at Frank, and Harris flinched. Frank whacked Harris in the back of the head with the bottle. He fell in a shower of glass and booze.

Hundred dollar bills flitted out over the porch and into the sand. Frank limped past Harris and picked up the .38 from where it had butted up against one of the columns. He then shuffled back and took the car keys out of Harris' pocket. Frank looked at the keys for a moment. There it was, his ticket to freedom, and yet the world that opened up ahead of him seemed blank; a vast, bald tundra howling from its emptiness. He moved slowly to the far end of the porch and peeked around the side of the house. Frank pressed the keyless entry. The red Ford Mustang honked cheerfully in reply and flashed its headlights. A blue minivan was parked in front of the car. It must have belonged to the dead couple. He looked over at the boys again. The cash twirled around with the wind in the sand and on the wood planks of the porch. Frank bent, and started picking up some of the money and stuffing it into his shorts.

When he was done he called the boys over. Neither boy moved a muscle. Through their gaze Frank realized he must have looked a fright, the blood running from his forehead wound over his nose and lips, the grenadine staining the rest of his body.

"It's okay," Frank said. He saw then the older boy was clutching a wad of hundred dollar bills. The boy put the money behind his back. Frank waved and stepped off the porch into the hot sand.

"It's okay, it's all right," Frank said. "It's all just a game."

Nothing Abnormal

Three days in the hospital and the doctor's find nothing wrong with Chris. They say the cause might be stress, but Jackie could've told him that. She never went to the hospital to visit him. She told her boyfriend not to go in the first place. What business did he have clogging up the ER when *real* people had *real* injuries? She didn't expect they would keep him under observation, but still she doubted it was anything serious. By the third day, after Chris texts to say he will be discharged and Jackie sees the photo his mother posted—him standing beside his hospital bed smiling wearily, dressed in a rumpled t-shirt and jeans from three days earlier, plastic bracelet around his wrist, clutching a blue stuffed bear and flowers—she is sucker-punched by guilt. She decides to get Chris a gift.

Jackie finds the stethoscope at a Goodwill store. It is being sold as part of a Halloween costume, paired oddly with a chef's coat. She tests it out on herself, over her shirt to protect against the chill of the bell. The sound is hard to discern through the excitement inside the store—the squeak of shoes as three children chase each other in cheap plastic masks and a large mother hollering—so Jackie moves away from the bustle to an empty aisle. White metal shelves display empty picture frames, stacks of mismatched plates, a multitude of stained coffee mugs, and a single coconut shell carved into the solemn face of an ape. Here she tries the stethoscope again and the reliable

thunka-thunk of her heart surfaces. She is relieved. She then notices a scrawny boy in shorts glaring at her. He had been eyeing the stethoscope before she grabbed it. She sticks her tongue out and the boy runs away to hide in a rack of winter coats.

Some hours later Jackie and Chris sit together on the floor of his apartment. He still wears the hospital bracelet, blue and white, which he turns on his wrist as he talks. She sees for the first time his middle name. Chris tells her how the doctors watched his heart beating in real time while he tried to run on a treadmill without tripping over his own feet. They measured his blood oxygen levels. They shaved his chest and stuck sensors to his skin that were connected to a cold, cumbersome device he had to sleep with at night. *I didn't miss you at all*, he quips.

During his stay at St. Joseph's, Chris ate cheeseburgers for lunch. He watched daytime television without irony. He gave purposefully obscure answers to the nurses' leading personal questions.

"Why wouldn't you tell them the truth?" Jackie says.

"They're nurses, not psychologists," he says and shrugs.

In the end the doctors presented him with a sheet of paper, a repeated landscape of peaks and valleys. *Nothing abnormal*. Of course he wasn't convinced.

"It's not an arrhythmia," he says. "Maybe that's why the doctors didn't catch it."

"What is it then?" she says. He looks studious, and uncharacteristically earnest.

"It feels like there's a wheezy old man in there," he says.

Jackie laughs and presents him with a box wrapped in the comic strip section. It is meant to be a joke, like the gifts they exchanged when they first started dating and nothing was taken seriously. But after Chris sees the stethoscope he is so grateful she has

to pretend that it isn't funny when he immediately plugs the ear-tips in his ears then lifts his shirt over his head and gets tangled with the tubing. She stifles a laugh when he places the bell to his hairless chest and visibly shivers.

Jackie stays at Chris' apartment for two days. During this time Chris does not remove the stethoscope from his neck. He listens like a man cracking a safe. Jackie is more annoyed than concerned. She goes back to her own apartment to sulk and drink with her roommates, but he never calls. He doesn't leave her drunken voicemails. He doesn't text with his usual stream of tearful emojis. When she shows up again at his apartment the door is unlocked. She finds him eating a bowl of colorful cereal at his cheap fold up table. The bell of the stethoscope shoved up underneath his t-shirt. His left cheek bulges, but he is not chewing. He holds a finger up for her to wait. She does not.

"What are you doing?" she says. Chris swallows.

"I'm listening to my heart," he says.

She snorts, "What is this, a Tom Petty song?"

He ignores the jab.

"I think I understand," he says and taps his pen on the tabletop. Jackie notices a yellow notebook pad next to the cereal bowl. He has written several lines in an indiscernible scrawl.

"Understand what?" she says.

"It was faint before, but I think I can finally make out the words," he says and starts writing. She watches over his shoulder as he scribbles, then grabs the stethoscope by the tubing and yanks it from his head.

"Ow," he says. "What the fuck?"

Jackie sticks the ear-tips in her ears and pushes him back into his seat.

"Come on," Chris says. He reaches for the stethoscope but she swats his hand away.

Shhhhh.

She kneels beside him and pulls his t-shirt up over his face.

"Why do you always have to..." he says. She shoves him back again and presses the bell to his skin.

Shhhhh.

"This is stupid."

"Shut up," she says. He sighs and goes limp. She moves the bell over his chest.

"Breathe," she says.

"I *am* breathing," he says.

Jackie holds the bell over the center of his left breast. She wants to hear it.

"What did he say?" Chris says. He cocks his head and grins. "You heard him didn't you?" he says. Jackie ignores him.

Shhhhh.

He sits still. Aware that she is being watched closely, Jackie keeps her face tense. She stares daggers into his bare sternum and listens. She holds the stethoscope in place. She can feel Chris' gaze.

"Sorry babe," Jackie says and shrugs. She pulls down his shirt. For a second Chris' eyes are fierce with skepticism, then he slouches. A familiar defeated countenance returns. He droops, nearly sliding off his chair. She knows that he has lost something. She wants

him back, that day in the park on a too small blanket they shared. A picnic basket full of beer and baby bell cheese. She wants him there to pick invisible ticks off her legs.

Suddenly Jackie feels tender for Chris. She puts an arm around him and kisses his cheek. He doesn't respond. She gently places the ear-tips in his ears and brings the bell up to her lips. "I love you," she shouts. He rips the stethoscope from his head and throws it aside.

"Shit," he says and rubs his ears. He looks over at the stethoscope. The instrument has broken into several pieces. "Why would you do that?" he says. He goes to collect the parts, scooting on his knees. She watches him, confused by her own aggressive pity.

"It was supposed to be a joke," she says.

The Records

My girlfriend Jamie took the first job she was offered after college serving at this Greek bar and grill. You know the type of place; all blue and yellow tile table tops and heavy purple drapes. A place where belly dancers click around the tables of men at night, their bodies half lit by flaming cheese. *Opa!* That sort of thing.

Jamie and I had been dating for maybe a year when we moved in together. I was paying my share of the rent, but the money was running out and, because of pride or whatever, I wasn't applying for the type of work I could actually get. I was spending most of my time painting. I hadn't been a painter in school, I was a graphic design major, but something struck me once I graduated. A sort of panic. I felt like I was desperately grasping at the edge of the pool. I was trying to avoid exactly what I had set myself up to be. I spent my time in the shed behind the apartment building gessoing overly large canvases and smoking weed.

Jamie usually worked the day shift but she only invited me up for some free lunch once. The restaurant was around the corner from our apartment, so I arrived in less than ten minutes after her text. I found Jamie alone in the dining room, rolling silverware in blue napkins. She greeted me with a sleepy sort of shrug, as if to say she was not responsible for the poor management of the business. In the daylight I could see the gray

grime between the tiles and sagging hammocks of dust on the drapes. There was soccer on the TV for the cooks. The dancers were at their day jobs.

I was sitting at the bar eating falafel when an old car with an exasperated engine pulled up outside. It was a square snouted Mercedes, with a dull gold paint job. It looked like it was from the 1980s.

"That's him," Jamie said. "The lawyer."

She had told me about him before, one night after she came home from working a rare double shift. We lived in an upstairs apartment and I could hear her muttering to herself when she was locking the door. She clomped up the stairs, threw a ball of greasy dollar bills on the table and wadded up her apron. She pulled off her shoes, socks, and slid down her black jeans and left them in the middle of the floor. I was sitting on the couch watching TV. I knew it was time to let her vent so I hit the mute button and started rolling a joint. This had become our sort of an after-work ritual.

"Oh my friggin' lord," she said and collapsed on the couch next to me.

"What happened?" I said. Jamie shook her head.

"This guy."

"Some weirdo?" I said. She had to deal with a lot of weirdos at that job.

"Just a drunk. Came in at lunch and drank until close," she said.

"That's commitment." I handed her the joint and looked around for the lighter on the coffee table.

"Juan had to walk him out. We should've stopped serving him. I called him a cab but he just got in his car and took off."

"Geeze."

"Yeah." She leaned into me and her naked thigh touched my knee. She smelled of lemon and smoke. She found the lighter in between the couch cushions like it was where she always left it, lit the joint and puffed. "He's getting divorced," she said.

"How original of him," I said but she didn't laugh. She was quiet for a moment, then looked up at me. "What?" I said.

"He's so fucking sad."

She then went on to tell me all about the guy, though I didn't want to know. His name was Tom. He was in his late forties maybe, a lawyer, a partner in a small firm though she couldn't remember which. He had two kids. He used to be a musician, bass guitar, but went to law school because he was tired of being broke. After she told me all that we sat in silence before the muted TV. There was a commercial with smiling women in bathing suits holding beer bottles. They looked genuinely happy, but I noticed none of them actually drank any of the beer. They just held up the bottles, or handed them away to men. I took the joint from her.

"How'd you come about this information?" I said.

"What?"

"How do you know all this?"

"He told me."

"Yeah, but why?" I said.

She shrugged and said, "I guess he needed somebody to talk to."

Tom came back several times after that. I'm not sure how often but I'd say almost every day. I couldn't keep track of the weirdos that came into that place. The cocaine guy, and the men in suits who didn't seem to have much to do but drink and laugh, the retired

baseball player and his toothy wife. The owner was a swinger, and invited Jamie out on his boat for a party. That one pissed me off but I didn't tell her. She didn't like when I started throwing my weight around. She said she could take care of herself.

Finally getting a look at the lawyer was really something. Tom lurched out of his car and I was relieved that he was so ugly. I couldn't believe he was actually a lawyer the way he looked. He stood outside and through the window I saw him flick at the thin, reddish hair pasted to his forehead and squint at the midday summer sun. Somehow he looked both pathetic and dangerous at once, like a zoo bear set free. He hunched over, searching for something in the back seat.

"What's he doing?" I said. Jamie shrugged.

"His wife kicked him out," she said.

I watched him closely, but Jamie just kept rolling the silverware and making neat stacks.

"Well he sure hasn't missed a meal," I said. Jamie frowned.

"He came in with his kids yesterday. They looked upset, so I gave them some free baclava," she said. "He told me he thinks they hate him." I turned back to my food.

"Don't cry over him. He shouldn't have been fucking around," I said. One of the cooks came out of the kitchen to check on the soccer game. He stood there tapping his feet. Then he looked over at me, my food, pushed up his flat bill baseball cap and grinned. I took a bite and saluted him. Then he looked past me, rolled his eyes and went back into the kitchen saying something in Spanish.

"I don't know if that's what happened," Jamie said.

"What then? Because he's a drunk?" I said.

"Maybe he wasn't like that before," she said.

"We're not born drunks," I said and sipped my beer.

"Obviously," Jamie said and gave me a look.

"What do you think happened?"

"I just know he's living in a hotel now," she said and sighed.

"Oh yeah? Which hotel?"

"The Chase."

I scoffed and Jamie punched me in the arm, but I knew there was only one reason a man would tell a woman that he was staying in a fancy hotel.

"Hey, I bet it's got a nice view of the park," I said.

"Stop," she said. I turned around and looked at Tom again. He was fiddling with something in the backseat.

"Why does he drive that car?" I said.

"Huh?"

"If he's rich, why does he drive that old ass car?" Jamie stopped rolling the silverware and looked out the window. Tom lifted a cardboard box from the backseat of the car and slid it onto the roof. He stood gulping air, his fists dug into his waist.

"I never said he was rich," Jamie said.

"Come on, Jamie," I said.

"Come on, what? I think it's kinda cool," she said and turned back to the silverware.

"But who would drive that by choice? I bet it doesn't even have air conditioning."

Jamie didn't say anything so I kept on talking. "Kind of a slap in the face."

"A slap in the face?" she said.

"Yeah."

"To *whom*?"

"Those of us who can't afford air conditioning."

"Your car has air conditioning."

"Barely."

"*My* car doesn't."

"That's what I'm saying."

"What are you saying?"

"It's a slap in the face to *you*."

Jamie was silent, and I returned my attention to Tom, making notes in my head to mock him later. Tom rolled up his sleeves, mopped his brow with a freckled forearm, blinked in the sunlight, then clenched his teeth and lifted the box again. He leaned back, the weight of the box against his chest. He almost fell over.

"He's got something. I think he's bringing something in here," I said.

"Oh," Jamie said. "I didn't think he was serious."

"About what?" I said. Tom was on the other side of the street, waiting for a bus to pass.

"He said he'd give me his old records," Jamie said.

"He did?"

"Yeah."

"And you said...?"

"I didn't really say anything. I guess I said okay." Jamie finished rolling the silverware then headed for the door.

"You never told me about this," I said.

"I thought I did."

"You didn't."

"Well, I don't tell you everything," she said and smiled. I thought about this for a moment, but as she was about to open the door I shouted, "He just wants to fuck you." I heard the cooks laughing in the back of the kitchen. Jamie looked back and mouthed the words *shut the fuck up*, then opened the door.

It's natural for an alcoholic to fall in love with his waitress, although certainly cliché. Jamie and I met under similar circumstances. We went to college together in the same small Missouri town, but we didn't meet until just before graduation. Jamie started serving at the restaurant where I was working as a line cook. It was one of those Texas style steak places, and she wore these cute black cowboy boots. All the girls had to wear them, but none pulled the look off like Jamie. The other girls were always complaining and asking the kitchen staff to rub their feet. Some of them did it too. I did it, sure, but not after Jamie came around. Jamie never asked anybody to rub her feet.

I watched Jamie as she scooted between tables, trying to interpret every move of her body as something to do with me. The other line cooks and the dishwashers were always hitting on her. I drank a lot back then, but I avoided talking when I was drunk. The cooks used to sneak tequila shots in the walk-in between rushes. I was lucky that she

already liked me. I don't know why, maybe it was because I never said anything. She had heard one too many lines by that point.

There's an intimacy to serving that can be mistaken for true affection. These guys who came in to buy thirty dollar steaks, they assumed their server was included in the price they were paying. Waitresses have to constantly dodge the wayward longings of the men they serve. Your friendliness in any given moment can be misinterpreted a thousand different ways, but if you're too cold you better forget about getting a decent tip.

Jamie was good at her job. She was a sociology major, amnesty international and all that, and this gave her an empathy that was balanced by the fact she was brilliant and could take you down a peg, easy, if you got out of line. She tried to give the other girls advice about how to handle their male customers, or men in general I guess. She'd say, "Guys are like greyhounds. You know how they chase that fake rabbit around a track? If they actually catch that thing what would they do? They'd mash on the metal till their gums bleed." She'd say, "You lend them an ear they take a limb. Never give them permission. Not even something they might mistake for permission."

Around that time Jamie and I went on our third date, which was really just drinks after work. Some frat boy put his arm around her when she was headed to the bathroom. I saw this and clocked the guy something good. His buddies proceeded to kick the shit out of me. After the fight there was a knot on the top of my head the size of a golf ball, and blood bloomed at the edge of my right eye. Jamie drove me home. She stayed over night and took care of me, though she slept on the couch and wouldn't answer my questions. She soaked my bloody shirt in the tub.

The next morning she told me she deplored violence. It made her physically ill. She said she couldn't be with someone like me because it was the antithesis of everything she valued. I told her I'd change and I did. I quit drinking for a time. I started meditation and yoga. It took a while to convince her but she eventually relented.

Tom leaned past Jamie to fit through with his box, talking all the time, his voice high and excited, but I couldn't make out what he was saying. I was surprised how tall he was. He had the clumsy charm of a retired wrestler. It seemed crazy anybody would ever hire him to be their lawyer. Like if he showed up in court I wouldn't know if he was the lawyer or the guy about to be shackled and carted off to prison. His face was pale, the bags under his eyes bruised green, and his neck was splotchy. He wore a thin blue button down shirt that was now damp under the armpits. He must have bought the shirt recently because it still had the square creases from the packaging. I turned away, hoping he wouldn't notice me, but Tom sat down just one stool over. I noticed then he was wearing these old leather sandals, his long toenails darkened by dirt. He set the box on the bar and breathed loudly. Jamie dug in the icebox and pulled out a Heineken.

"I think you're gonna like these Jamie," Tom said. His nose was red and pocked like a dewy strawberry, his cheeks and forehead blushed.

"Oh yeah?" she said.

"Right up your alley."

The way Tom talked to her riled me, but I stayed cool. For the moment I was invisible and could see them interact the way they might when I wasn't around. I also knew Jamie could handle herself. I had to trust her. I stared ahead and tried to mind my

own business. Another, shorter cook with whiskers like a cat popped up in the expo window, looked at me, snickered and disappeared. I thought maybe they were smoking out back, and I considered joining them just to avoid this pathetic scene.

Jamie fingered through the records and pulled one out. She slid the record out of its sleeve to inspect the vinyl. She held it up carefully, with just her fingertips. The way I taught her.

"That's a good one," Tom said. "You ever heard Television? They were great. Everybody thought they'd be huge. I played in a band that opened for them in San Francisco. I was living there at the time. Frisco was something, man. It was crazy. Not like now. Not at all. Fucking yuppies ruin everything." Jamie gave him the sort of look that she often gave me when I said something stupid. Tom laughed. "I know, I know," he said. Jamie slid the record back in its sleeve, set it down, and picked up another. Tom Petty's "Full Moon Fever."

"I bought that in Albuquerque. There was this record shop ran by this Indian guy who sold dope. This one's got a lot of the hits on it, but my favorite is "Yer So Bad." You know it?" Tom said. Jamie shook her head and Tom started singing. "But not me, ba-by. I got you-to-save-me." He leaned over the bar and crooned. "Oh, yer so bad. Best thing I ever had." Jamie smiled and opened the record sleeve. "There might be a little bit of green still in there. Ya know, in the crease," Tom said and winked. He picked another record himself and looked at the cover, then turned it toward Jamie. "This is a first pressing," He handed the record to her. "You said you liked Costello right? I kept this one for you. This guy from my firm wanted to buy it, but I kept it for you." Jamie started making a stack. You're not supposed to stack vinyl, but Tom didn't seem to care what

Jamie did. I was the record collector, Jamie wouldn't know Elvis Costello from Elvis Presley.

"Whatever you want," Tom said. "A beautiful girl like you should get what she wants." I looked over at Jamie and she rolled her eyes. She collected the records and started toward me. I wanted to stay out of the transaction, but she pushed aside my beer and fanned the records out on the bar in front of me.

"Check these out baby," she said. She never called me baby. I glanced at Tom. It looked like someone had just hammered a nail into the middle of his forehead. I felt bad for the guy all of a sudden, but it seemed I had been cast in a role and I went along with her lead.

"Oh yeah, these are really cool," I said. Tom narrowed his eyes, then smiled. It was a practiced smile. A courtroom smile. A smile he could pull off whether he was drunk or sober. He looked at Jamie and smiled that same way. "This is real good stuff. Why are you getting rid of them?" I said. Tom looked over the records still in the box. He was expressionless.

"Oh you know," he looked up at the ceiling and shrugged with his hands open, palms up like a man surrendering to lightning strike. "All up in the cloud now."

"Well, it's generous. Really, very cool. Thank you," I said and patted Tom on the back in a manly way. Tom just frowned and looked at his beer. He tipped back on his stool and took a loud suck off the bottle. Jamie introduced us formally then, like two rival ambassadors. She called me her partner. I had never heard that before. It sounded very dignified the way she said it. I guess it was fitting. Back then we were an alliance of sorts, us against the world, as cheesy as that sounds. A few months before, our roommates had

moved out and we were left in a big apartment we couldn't afford. The place was a shit hole. We shared a twin mattress, my ass against a wall that was cold all year long. That winter we sealed the windows with plastic, me standing on a chair with a blow drier. It made it so when you tried to look out everything was in this kind of milky haze, and the sound of it when the wind blew was like the whole world were ripping apart.

Tom didn't know any of that. It's not like he asked. He had his time with Jamie, why would he want to see anything outside of that? The truth is rarely charitable to the ego. After Jamie introduced us he shook my hand. Tom had a big red hand, but he didn't squeeze hard or anything. He was kind of limp, and clammy. Then he leaned over and I noticed he had buttoned his shirt wrong. I could see an angry pimple on his white belly. Tom whispered something. It had the cadence of advice but I didn't hear it right. He then sat back on his stool and offered to buy me a beer, but Jamie came trotting around with a fresh Bud I hadn't asked for. I guessed then why she had invited me to lunch.

Tom ordered another beer for himself and finished it with one long slug. He put the bottle down hard on the bar top and exclaimed with exaggerated pleasure. He then got up and threw a bunch of cash next to the empty bottle.

"You enjoy now," he said. He left the box on the bar and went toward the door.

"This is too much," Jamie said and tried to gather up the bills and the box, but Tom was already standing on the street, looking back and forth at the traffic.

Jamie and I got in a big fight that night. I wanted her to admit why she had invited me up there, but she kept saying it was just a coincidence. I asked her what it was exactly she expected me to do?

“What did you think, I was going to hit the guy? Take him out back? Is that why you kept feeding me those beers? Trying to get me all riled up?” I said. Jamie got real quiet, and then looked at me like I was the dumbest person she had ever met. She said she didn’t expect me to do shit, and she was right, I didn’t do shit.

Jamie quit serving pretty soon after that. Not because of Tom. She went back to school. I had to get a real job. I started designing graphics for a t-shirt company, making logos for corporate softball teams and cancer walks mostly. We broke the lease on our apartment and moved to the opposite end of the city.

Now Jamie and I are getting ready to buy a house and I’m looking over our the accumulation of our eight years together. We have stacks of DVDs and VHS tapes, though we seem to only watch Netflix now. We have two broken crock pots, and three food processors. We have two couches, one which belongs exclusively to the cat, and a set of padded folding chairs we use for guests that never come because our apartment is too small. Then there are Tom’s records, still in the original cardboard box stamped with some obscure wine logo.

I don’t listen to the records. I can’t help but feel they had some influence on the way things went for Tom. Jamie sometimes will take a record out and get it mixed up with the rest of our collection, and I have to go through and put them back in the box. I could sell them, or just drop them off at Goodwill. I don’t think Jamie would care. I doubt she ever thinks about the guy. Without the story it’s just another heavy box. An inconvenience to push onto someone else.

Open House

At first it seemed to Mark that his wife was enjoying her unplanned days off, sipping her coffee loudly with her fuzzy socked feet up on the couch. The HR offices at the brewery were closed due to a pipe bursting and spilling sewage all over the computers, so she would be home for at least the week. But by the end of day two she had grown restless. She began to notice the inadequacies of their life together. That was not to say she was wrong. Mark had long felt that their lives had failed to move forward, but for him mediocrity was already routine. She simply had not had the chance to experience the day to day drag of it yet.

It was the fourth morning of Heather's involuntary sabbatical when she stopped Mark and their dog Ralph, at the door. She was half-smiling, her red hair piled on her head and tied up in a sort of artfully lazy way, but on closer inspection was a tightly controlled tussle.

"Where do you go every frickin' morning anyway?" she said. Mark was surprised. Heather was not the confrontational type, at least not with him. She hardly showed any interest in Mark's activities until the last couple of days. On her second day home she started talking about furthering his career. At lunch she suggested he should go for an MSW, but for Mark that just meant more school and a career which paid little in cash and

even less in gratitude. Mark was still paying off debt from his undergraduate degree, and so was Heather. He had no interest in accumulating more student loans. College was meant to be the springboard that would propel him into adulthood, marriage, buying a house, having a couple of kids. But after all of that had stalled out he began to believe he had made a foolish choice majoring in Psychology.

All of Mark's efforts in the job market since —some eight years ago now—had resulted in a minimally paid evening shift at the front desk of the Golden Bluffs Retirement Community. His main job requirement was to withstand the unsolicited advice of the shuffling residents, whose consensus was that Mark stood at the precipice of great possibilities still to be identified and pursued with the relentless savagery of youth. They had made the common mistake of assuming Mark was much younger than he actually was.

He did enjoy talking to the residents. The nosier they were the better. Recently he began shaping a little narrative for them. He told them he was attending graduate school during the day in pursuit of a doctoral degree. This prompted one man with an eye patch to ask about his specialization. Mark began researching studies, and crafted a thesis outline detailing the effects of prolonged isolated confinement among young white males. The topic proved to be outside the residents' realm of knowledge, but they would sit and listen contentedly as he talked.

Heather traced her fingertip over the door frame, and began picking at the paint. Mark had to think of a lie to tell, but then did something strange; he told the truth.

"I've been checking out this house," he said. Mark had not told his wife about the house before. For some reason it seemed like a betrayal, to her or the house, he wasn't sure. Heather pursed her lips. She scratched around the red bun of hair, delicately, as to not disturb the arrangement.

"What do you mean seeing a house? Like to live in?" she said. Mark thought about this a moment, and came up with what he considered to be an honest answer.

"Yes," he said.

"We didn't talk about this," she said, softening.

"No, I guess not," he said.

"I mean, we can't afford it right now," she said. Mark shrugged.

"There's some government incentives for new homebuyers. Big benefits. And the interest rates are low right now, who knows what will happen in a few months? No harm in taking a look," he said. "You want to see it?"

"You mean, like an open house?"

"I guess so," he said. She was quiet, considering.

"But..." she began to say.

"Let's go right now," he said. Heather looked up.

"Now?" she said. Mark, feeling bold, ready to seize upon this world he had built in his mind, grabbed his wife's hand and tried to drag her out of the apartment. She pushed him away playfully.

"I'm still in my pjs. Let me change so I can at least look like a person with her life together," she said.

The Phelps' destination was a few blocks west from their apartment, where a bean shaped set of streets butted up against the grid of the city. An affluent island lined with tall trees and ornate street signs. Here were mansions built in the early 19th century. Some of the mansions were fashioned after German castles, with turrets and wood beam roofs, or they mimicked the Spanish style with arches and white stucco walls, or they strove for the same sober and dignified look of government buildings with columns of marble and other stone. Dark statues, confident in their nudity, stood watch over expansive lawns. Gray cheeked cherubs tinkled into fountains shrouded behind tall, expertly shaped shrubbery. Iron lamplights with bouncing gas flames burned even during the day. Most of these gigantic homes were empty, save for a few yapping dogs, and seemingly vulnerable with their many doors and windows.

Ultimately it was not the regal mansions that brought Mark to this place. Some time ago he had become enamored with a modest bungalow set atop a small hill covered with ivy thick enough to fool the crickets dwelling below into thinking it was still night well past noon. The house had a round hobbit door made of dark wood, with a circular window threaded in the shape of an abstract flower. The roof was red clay tile and had a window peeking out, suggesting that the upper floor had vaulted ceilings. From the sidewalk he could glimpse into the yard where below a string of fairy lights there was an iron black chiminea and a circle of red Adirondack chairs.

Mark's feeling when he first came across the house was not envy. A cool sort of ease settled over him, a drowsy forgetfulness. He lost any sense of his limitations. While the nearby mansions were vast, untouchable, nearly inconceivable in their bare existence, Mark could envision himself in this place. He saw himself hosting a party in the yard with

a glass of red wine in one hand, surrounded by a number of astonished friends listening to his self-deprecating success story. He must have stood on the sidewalk a good five minutes staring before he was shocked back into reality by the ringing bell of a cyclist. He moved on, red-faced and breathless. Mark had visited the house almost every day since.

After Heather got dressed the couple crated the dog and walked hand in hand. Their neighborhood was a bit shabby if not slightly run down. Two blocks east a youth baseball field, mined with the shit of wild dogs, grew shaggy around its outer fences, and the playground sparkled with broken glass. A few blocks north warehouses—one of which had collapsed to reveal its long empty belly—stood over the deterioration with stoic, deadened faces, the cheerful ghosts of advertisements tattooed up their sides. Mark used to revel in the desolation here, but then these buildings began to be bought up by young people (younger than either of the Phelps) who opened sustainable coffee roasters, ambiguous tech start ups, and noisy art cooperatives. None of which Mark had any use for, but made him feel like he was falling even farther behind.

Many of the old houses on their block were being hammered back into shape. Men kneeled on rooftops listening to radios that oozed pop country music. They shouted back and forth over the ka-thunk of hammers. Orange dumpsters took up whole parking spaces, overflowing with the refuse of lives lived but now declared out-of-date or toxic. The hint of renewal is what attracted Mark and Heather to the neighborhood in the first place. They had wanted to buy one of the old houses, rip out its guts, and stuff it again with life. Five years later they were still renting. Mark began to feel as though he was left to rot as the city itself bloomed from its own ruins.

Heather held onto Mark as he hurried them through the hanging dust.

"I've been worried about you," she said after a while.

"Really?" he said, genuinely shocked.

"Yeah, I came home one day for lunch. I thought I'd surprise you. But you weren't here. I thought for a second you might be cheating on me," she said. Mark had most likely been at the house. He blushed a little, then laughed dismissively.

"Have you thought about what I said. You know, about going back to school?" Heather said.

"Sure, I've thought about it," Mark said.

"I just feel like it would do you some good. Those night shifts with the old people, it can't be good for you," she said and pulled him a little closer. "Doesn't it get depressing?" Mark nodded absently, but it was the night shift that gave him the mornings free.

"It's probably a good idea," Mark said. "This way."

On previous visits, Mark had learned a lot about the habits of the family that lived in the house. He knew that during the summer mornings the neighborhood was loud with insects and loose children, but the little house itself was quiet. The owners were gone during the week. He imagined they must have jobs that, while more than adequately paid, required an outward display of folksiness and approachability. The dean of a university perhaps, or the head of a small non profit. For them, a larger house would be unseemly.

Mark also learned that a lone man walking around staring at houses attracted suspicion in this neighborhood. A private security car drove up beside him during one of

his walks the previous fall. The officer seemed vaguely annoyed for his being dispatched. He had a large mound of black curly hair, but on the right side of his head the hair was matted to his skull as if he had been sleeping, leaned up against the window.

"Shouldn't you be in school kid?" The officer said. Mark flushed, suddenly embarrassed by the state of his hoody, sneakers, and the patchy beard he had attempted to grow. He told the officer he was a college grad, and then bolstered his status with a lie.

"I'm in tech," he said. "We're thinking about moving our company here. Just checking out some real estate." The officer squinted dubiously, then nodded and went on his way. Mark realized then the solitary wanderer appears as the embodiment of poor luck, a bad omen, a man wielding his reverse Midas touch.

That was when Mark decided to get a dog. A man walking a dog projects normalcy. He bears only the burden of smiles from even the most wary of strangers. He didn't have enough money in the bank to adopt a dog so he stalked the neglected baseball diamond near his home waiting for his chance. The dog was fast, skeptical at first, but in the end Mark was able to dupe him with a treat. He lured the dog close enough to grab the mildew smelling rope around his neck and the dog, being as good natured as he was and probably hungry, came along willingly from there. Heather assumed the dog was a gift for her, and Mark did not deny it. She gave him a flea bath, took him to the vet, and named the dog Ralph.

Mark was then free to visit the house as much as he wished, but with the increased visits a sort of lust began to ferment. For a while he had been satisfied by simply fantasizing. Then his imagination began to fizzle. He no longer could shape the contours

of the world within. He only had a desire to enter. His fantasies were replaced by a vision of himself bursting through the back door.

Mark wanted to inspire in his wife the same culmination of wonder he had experienced when he first discovered the house, and so led her the long way through the neighborhood. He walked backward like a tour guide pointing out all the familiar sights. He waved at the security officer sitting in his car before realizing it was a different man, younger with a square goatee, and a face that seemed frozen with studious fury, like he was examining a toxic organism. The security guard eventually saluted back, and Mark took this recognition as a legitimization of his presence here, filling him with confidence. He brushed away Heather's concerns with jokes. They laughed over the lavishness of the mansions, sharing their distaste for the aesthetics of the rich. They ran up on someone's lawn to take a selfie together, then Heather took a picture of Mark cupping the breasts of a particularly buxom statue.

When the couple arrived at the house Heather almost didn't notice it. Mark had to direct her gaze away from the ridiculous mansions, onto the front walk and the plentiful ivy.

"Oh, it's cute," she said. Mark felt the first sudden pang of remorse, but was then seized by the need to prove his attentions had not been wasted.

"Let's go inside," he said, surprising himself. Heather squinted. She shaded her eyes with her hand.

"There's not even a for sale sign up," she said.

"It's not on the market yet," he said. Heather looked around uncertainly.

"Are we meeting the realtor or something?" she said.

"No, but she told me how to get in," Mark said casually rocking on his heels, his hands in his pockets. "She said I could come whenever I wanted." Heather looked skeptical. She scratched her scalp again. Mark started to stride up the driveway without her, then turned and stood with his arms crossed in a pose of complete and unquestioned ownership.

The previous winter had been harsh, and Mark found himself trapped in the apartment for weeks. Unable to visit the house, he grew anxious and intractable. He hissed curses at the loud neighbor upstairs, and sent his landlord angry emails about the inefficient furnace. Finally, winter seemed to have lost its grip and he dragged the reluctant Ralph out into the wincing sun and headed for the house.

This was the first time Mark noticed signs of children outside the house. Sled tracks were hardened into ice on the small hill. A wet mitten was stuck to a pile of soiled snow, probably lost in the guts of a snowman to be revealed again by the thaw. Mark hung the mitten from a notch in the lamp post for the family to easily find. He then decided that they might not notice the mitten there, removed it and left the mitten on the front step. After a moment of consideration he decided this was inadequate as well. He then tied Ralph to the nearest tree, walked up the steps to the door thinking he might slip the mitten through the mail slot.

For just a second Mark peered through the round window, down a blonde wood hallway and into small sitting room. Air plants reached out with alien limbs from a built-in bookshelf. Just beyond the arm of a stout leather chair the sitting room opened into a

sun drenched dining room with a long farmer's table and a blue tin pale filled with scruffy yellow flowers. A homey, magazine scene beyond anything Mark could have arranged in his mind. He looked down to see his hand on the doorknob. The door was locked. He pushed the mitten through the mail slot.

When Mark headed down the steps he saw that Ralph was gone. Panicked, Mark ran out onto the street. When he turned back toward the house again he saw the dog trotting up the driveway to the back yard, his leash dragging through the puddles. Mark followed him, jogging dutifully, feigning frustrated grunts and calling the dog's name though no one was around to witness the theatrics.

Ralph sniffed purposefully around the backyard. Mark grabbed him by the collar but it was too late, the dog was in full squat in the muddy snow. It occurred to Mark then that he had forgotten to bring a bag. The people who lived in the house didn't own a dog so he couldn't just leave hoping it would go unnoticed, and he imagined the family and their neighbors would band together to capture and punish the scofflaw dog walker. He searched for a shovel, a garden spade, anything that could be used to bury the evidence or fling it into the neighbor's bushes. He found nothing. The garage was locked. Running home was not an option, someone might return to the house in the meantime and discover the unmistakable coil.

Mark's intention, as he tied the dog to the bottom railing and ascended the back porch steps, was only to get rid of the dog shit as quickly as possible. He did not force entry into the home. He shifted a few things around looking for a key. He lifted a potted plant, flipped up the corner of a straw welcome mat, moved another larger potted plant, and inspected a rock he thought might be a fake rock but was in fact just a rock. Finally

he tried a broken light fixture which, when slid sideways, revealed a hole in the masonry. He found the key there among a colorful knot of electrical wires.

Surprisingly, the first door was unlocked. No alarm sounded. No cameras he could see tracked his progress. He stepped through the door into a small mudroom while Ralph whined from his spot at the bottom of the deck steps. The room was cluttered with running shoes, a pair of tall olive green rubber boots next to two pairs of smaller pink galoshes, a huddle of umbrellas in an old caramel corn bucket and a package of soil slumped grumpily in the corner.

Mark came to the true back door of the house and used the key. Again, no alarm. He was careful to wipe his feet before he stepped inside. The kitchen was a generous size and somewhat different from what he imagined. There were gray slate countertops and a butcher block island accompanied by two rustic stools. The sink was at an angle to the room, and featured a spout that curved like the dipping neck of an egret. Behind the sink there was a window with its original plate glass, through which the gray backyard rippled like a pond.

Mark immediately went about searching for a plastic grocery bag. He was shoulders-deep into a cupboard when he felt something rub up against the back of his leg. He swung around and kicked at the thing. A plump tabby cat with gold and black stripes slid across the tiled floor. At first Mark felt ungainly for giving the cat such a vicious whack, but as she approached again, mewling insistently, his sympathy waned. He swatted at the cat to make her go away.

Once Mark had the bag in hand he stood in the kitchen a moment longer. The stainless steel refrigerator clicked on and whirled almost silently, lending the place a

serene atmosphere. Mark was calmed by the incontrovertible fact of the daily functioning of appliances. The automatic and efficient processes of the world outside his own life. The Phelps' refrigerator had gone haywire and Mark had had to endure the accusations of his landlord as the old man huffed and puffed, dragging the ancient behemoth away from the wall. Mr. Gorman frowned at the nuggets of dust that had accumulated there and seemed mystified by Mark's lack of skills. He grumbled in the knowing way that older men often do. *How you gonna handle having your own house?* Although the fridge had been fixed, it now had a sour smell neither he nor Heather could get rid of. Standing alone in this beautiful kitchen Mark could not help himself. He opened the refrigerator for a moment and gloried in the antiseptic light, sucking into his lungs cold, odorless air.

From then on Mark would often go inside the house, although he would deny himself some days in order to break up the regularity of his transgressions and, in his mind, lessen the likelihood that he would be caught. Despite this rational avoidance of authority and his secretive nature, Mark did not feel what he was doing was wrong. The key was there after all, available to anybody who might take the initiative to search.

He did not steal the clusters of change left out on the counters.

He did not eat any of their labeled and dated leftovers.

He did not nose through their strewn about financial records.

He did not read the personal post-it notes they sometimes left each other on the fridge or the cabinets.

The worst thing Mark did on these visits was lock the cat in the basement, but this was merely to keep her away from Ralph. He did give the cat a heaping bowl of food to make up for this, and the cat seemed happy enough. He would then sit in the leather

chair and read books while Ralph rested at his feet. He would speak lovingly to the air plants, or station himself at the head of the dining table and imagine whole meals, holiday dinners, or family game night. He imagined Heather there in a simple black dress, hair up to reveal her freckled neck, laughing charmingly at one of his jokes as they crowded around the fireplace. Or she wore glasses and a fashionable skirt, reigning over a moon faced child in a birthday hat, licking the broad side of the cake knife. Or she was just a curvy shadow sheathed in a plume of glamorous smoke, moving slowly toward him like an old movie sexpot. Maybe it wasn't Heather he imagined. Maybe it was something better.

On one of his visits Mark decided he would check out the bedrooms upstairs. He told himself he wasn't in it for some kind of perverse desire, and climbed the stairs with the grim seriousness of a surveyor. First the room the children shared. Two girls by the look of it. Though the room was a wreck, not one toy or piece of clothing crossed the threshold into the hall and the beds were made. This room was where the girls were allowed to let their creativity loose. The walls were covered with drawings, and the floor was a miniature city of frail Lego structures. Looking over the mess made Mark feel proud.

Next Mark went to the master bedroom. A king sized bed with an antique headboard and big round feet that sunk into the carpet held court over the space. The delicate creamy scent of soap hung in the air. The room was tidy, but not imposingly so. Two busy and successful people lived here, and he did not begrudge them the fact they had left one of the closet doors open. The closet contained five suits and numerous dress shirts in a variety of colors. One gray suit, apparently considered then rejected, lay on the

bed. Mark had never owned a suit that was not second-hand. He ran his fingers over the jacket's purple silk lining, then put the coat on. He stood in front of the mirror and examined himself. The jacket fit, but he looked like a bad 90's comedian wearing it with a t-shirt.

The early summer sky hung low, bulging with rain, and Mark gazed up at the clouds with a growing sense of dread. Heather followed Mark to the back of the house, but then wandered away.

"Oh, they have kids," Heather said as she passed the various toys tossed about the backyard. Heather wanted to have kids, it was a topic they had discussed many times before. They put it off and put it off, searching for that perfect moment when they'd have the proper amount of money, the sure kind of stability. But it seemed to Mark that they were staring down into a well that was too deep and dark to see the bottom. When he dropped a penny he never heard it land. In their last discussion Heather told Mark she was running out of time. Mark understood what she meant, but knew that time was hardly influenced by the actions he took. Mark wanted his wife to be happy so he had promised her things, but it was increasingly obvious the life he wanted was already taken.

Heather stopped at the edge of the grass. "This yard's a little small though," she said. Mark did not have an opinion about the yard so started toward the back door, but Heather walked up to the carriage house which had been converted into a modern garage. "I doubt my car's gonna fit in this thing. You'd have to park on the street," she said and winked at him. Mark went over, put an arm around her shoulders and led her to the back porch. "Cute porch," she said cheerfully.

Mark retrieved the key and when they entered the house the cat rushed up to greet him, rubbing enthusiastically against his leg.

"Oh kitty, kitty," Heather said and bent down to pet the cat. "Geeze, she sure likes you." Mark had to stop himself from picking up the cat and tossing it down the basement stairs. Instead he stepped through the kitchen and stood beside the refrigerator as the cat followed and meowed.

"Oh my gosh," Heather said. She followed her husband's path through the kitchen, dragging the palm of her left hand over the scars in the butcher block island. She stood at the sink and looked out the window into the garden. "Beautiful," she said. Mark perked up with this approval and smiled. Heather stood at the window a moment longer, and seemed to be inspecting something. She rapped her knuckle against the glass. "Old windows," she said. Heather then turned on the faucet and the water spluttered. She strangled the spout, trying to adjust the flow. "Not good," she said looking dour. Mark turned away as if he had stumbled onto a scene of violence when his wife began swinging open cabinets, yanking out drawers and scouring the pantry. When she was done she turned to him and blew a wayward curl of hair from her eyes. "Not a lot of storage," she said.

Heather went into the hall toward the bathroom, of which Mark had only been vaguely aware. She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. "You can barely turn around in here," she said. He heard her lift and drop the lid. She flushed the toilet. Mark was appalled by the intrusiveness of the sound. The swish and gurgle of the liquid made him cringe as it travelled underfoot, through the bowels of the house. Heather tried the doorknob. "I think it's stuck," she said. Mark grabbed the doorknob and twisted it. The

anger was rising in him. He should not have brought her here, and now he couldn't get her out. She shouted directions from behind the door. "No, no, you gotta turn it," she said. The door would not budge. He reared back and drove his shoulder into the door. Nothing doing. "It's an old door," he heard her say. "Maybe there's a key?" He felt around the top of the door frame and found a small key.

When Mark finally opened the door Heather pushed past him and breathed a sigh of relief. As she continued on through the house Mark noticed for the first time the framed photographs in the hall. The family and their strange faces. He had not bothered with them before. The father's round bald head glared sharply at him. The wife's smirk was skeptical. The children at their sides frozen in maniacal laughter. They cast him out.

Heather moved into the dining room. Light poured in from the windows and she glowed. Mark was calmed again as she moved around the table. She was a vision in this space, not so disparate from what he had imagined. He was gratified by the graceful way she danced around the chairs. She pinched the stem of one of the flowers on the table and brought it to her nose. She smiled and appeared to be thinking. She put the flower back and said, "A little cutesy, don't you think?"

Mark frowned, but Heather ignored the look on his face and leisurely made her way through to the sitting room. She put her hand on the back of the couch, then came around and sat down. Mark went to the window with the idea of letting in some fresh air, but the security guard passing by in his patrol car made him freeze. He gazed down over the empty sidewalk where he once stood in rapture for this place. From this angle the ivy appeared bare in patches, leaves crumpled with brown ragged edged holes. The ivy was being eaten away by some insect or ravaged by disease, and he could clearly see the dirt

below. He turned away from the window and looked back at his wife. Heather continued to scan over the adornments of the room, undoubtedly replacing things and moving bits around. Then sadness weighed down her smile. She sighed.

"How can we afford this?" she said. Mark let the question hang between them. He would just have to come up with some ridiculous number, then he could omit the part about the house not even being for sale. If they left now—though she would most certainly be angry and disappointed—the rest of the house could remain untouched and he might be able to salvage something of his previous fantasy. As Mark formed the words the cat came out from under the couch and bounded up beside Heather. Mark scowled at the cat, but this had no effect. The cat kneaded at Heather's thigh and purred loudly. His wife seemed to have forgotten what she had asked. "Come on, I want to see the rest," she said suddenly. She got up with the cat cradled in her arms, and went to the stairs. Mark followed, glumly dragging his feet.

On the second floor Heather looked in on the bathroom, which was small, she said, but *doable*. She liked the subway tile, and the clawfoot tub. She laughed when she saw the mess in the girls' room, but then her eyes welled and she was quiet. She kissed the cat, then set her down. The cat went back to Mark and stared up at him with expectant silence. He nudged her away with his foot. Heather peered down into the old fashioned laundry chute, and opened a linen closet. The white sheets folded on the shelves were like dormant ghosts. Mark shuddered. He needed to get out of the house, but Heather was already in the master bedroom.

"I hate carpet," she said looking down. She moved around the bed and sighed. "Really no closet space," she said with her hands on her hips. She looked up at the ceiling

fan. "Do you think they got central air? I don't see a vent." Mark stood in the doorway. "Maybe we could borrow some money from my parents for a down payment," Heather said. She walked over to Mark, and took his hand. "Did they give you a price?"

Mark could not look her in the eyes. A stillness fell over the house once again. In that moment he tried to recall, once more, the euphoria he once had in this place, the memories of a life that never existed. Instead he felt the way he sometimes did when Heather left him alone at a party full of strangers; a frustration for his born inability to fill the empty spaces. He took in a mouthful of air and began to speak. He was not sure what was going to come out. He looked up at his wife and saw that she was smiling.

A knock came from downstairs. Mark stiffened, and turned away from his wife to listen. Another couple of knocks, urgent, coming from the front door.

"Is that the realtor?" Heather said.

"Uh, maybe," Mark said. Another loud triplet of knocks. "You stay here, I'll go check." Mark left her in the bedroom and went down the stairs as quietly as he could. He could see the head of a man through the circle window of the front door. It was the security guard. He turned and saw Mark before he could duck away.

"Hello," he said. "Mr. Raymond?"

Mark went to the door and opened it. The security guard stood on the stoop in his blue polo shirt, patting his thighs. He had a large walkie talkie on his right hip that seemed to be making him lean slightly.

"Mr. Raymond?" he said and held out his hand for Mark to shake.

"Hi," Mark said and took his hand.

"Good morning sir. I don't believe we've met yet. I'm Officer Will Pitts from Hi-Pointe Security," he said. "One of your neighbor's called in, said they saw someone suspicious in your backyard." He spoke with deference, he even bowed his head a little. His hair was light blonde but slicked back severely and darkened with gel.

"Someone suspicious?" Mark said. Officer Pitts looked past Mark at the inside of the house.

"Did you have gardeners working today, anything like that?"

"No."

"Could be nothing. People call stuff in all the time. Lots of retirees around here. They get bored, maybe a bit paranoid. Too much time on their hands," Officer Pitts said and stepped back. He turned and looked down at his patrol car. Mark saw he had a gun on his left hip.

"Oh, yeah?" Mark said, staring at the gun. Officer Pitts turned back, and Mark quickly averted his gaze.

"You'd be surprised. Ms. Dingle, around the corner, she thought some man was staring through her window. Everyday for a week he was there, just staring at her. Turns out her neighbor had planted a bush along the fence. She needed a new prescription I guess. But you know, not for me to judge. That's not what y'all pay me for. Want me to take a look around back?"

"You don't have to do that," Mark said. He could hear Heather stirring at the top of the stairs.

"Not a problem," the officer said. Mark listened for his wife.

"Uh yeah, sure, go ahead," Mark said. Officer Pitts nodded and went back down the steps through the ivy.

"Better safe than sorry," he called back before Mark shut the door. Almost immediately the shouting began. Officer Pitts yelled, *Stop! Stop!* Mark heard the clap of the security guard's shoes as he ran up the driveway. He tried to follow the action through the windows along the side of the house but only saw the top of Officer Pitts' shiny head as he passed. Mark tripped over the leather chair and bumped into the dining room table trying to get a look.

Officer Pitts had already tackled a man in the grass of the backyard, beside a gray Prius that was not parked there before. He beat the man over the head several times with the butt of his gun. Once the man stopped struggling Officer Pitts pulled his arms behind his back and bound his wrists with plastic zip ties. After a moment of panting over the inert body he stood up and helped the man to his feet. The man was badly beaten, but Mark could see it was the same man from the photographs in the hall. Mr. Raymond. His mouth was bloody and his right eye was already swelling shut. He lost his balance and fell woozily to his knees. Officer Pitts yanked him back up.

"What's going on?" Heather said. She was standing at the foot of the stairs.

"There was an intruder," Mark said, pointing out the front window where Officer Pitts was now leading the bloodied Mr. Raymond to the patrol car. Mark walked back into the sitting room and straightened the leather chair.

"Oh my gosh, really?" Heather said. She walked over to her husband and helped him sit in the chair. She stroked his back. "Are you okay?" she said. At that moment a knock came at the door. Mark could see Officer Pitts' head. A glistening spike of hair

stood straight out from the top of his skull. Heather let him in, and upon seeing her he began tucking his shirt back under his belly, then stroked his goatee. He was sweating profusely. There was a fresh tear in his black pants.

"There was a man attempting to break into your garage," he said panting. The veins in his neck were bulging. "I was able to detain him. The police will be here soon to make an arrest. They will want to get a statement from you."

"Oh you're bleeding," Heather said. Officer Pitts looked down at his hands and laughed.

"That's not my blood," he said. "Would you mind if I used your bathroom?"

"I suppose that would be alright," Heather said. The officer stepped past her into the hall.

"Great place. Over here on the left?" he said.

"Yes," Heather said. Mark stood up and went to the door. He stared down at Mr. Raymond slumped in the back of the patrol car. He could see the slight rise in his shoulders when he breathed. The top of his bald head was pressed against the window. A streak of sweat and blood across the glass.

"Geeze, maybe we don't want to live in this neighborhood," Heather said and came close to Mark. "People like that around."

The toilet flushed and Officer Pitts rattled the bathroom doorknob. He called out and knocked on the door. He was locked in, he said. Heather took Mark's arm.

"Do you still have the key?" she said. Mark felt for the little key in his pocket.

"Just hold on a sec," Mark said.

"What?" Heather said and snorted. Inside the patrol car Mr. Raymond's head rolled against the back passenger window. He winced up with his one good eye and stared at Mark. He murmured something, his lips moving slowly. Mark stared back. He was imagining what it might be like to be Mr. Raymond. To be a successful man who had everything, a house and a nice suit with a purple lining and a wife and daughters and all that, then to be beaten in his own backyard, bound and thrown into a patrol car. Officer Pitts called out again. He pounded on the door. Heather shook Mark, but he couldn't be moved. Mr. Raymond was shouting now. His mouth wide and red, but Mark couldn't hear the words. What would that be like? What desperation seized him as he bashed his bloody forehead on the glass, spittle misting the window, his voice rattling uselessly inside the patrol car? To have everything right in front of you, but your hands tied behind your back.

The First of Three Trips

Sean's eleven year old son sits stiffly on the passenger seat of the rental car unbuckled, and stares over the stunted sprawl of Houston. His blonde hair is matted at the back and side from sleep. Sean frowns. Why isn't the kid more excited? All he did for the past two weeks was talk about going to the damn Space Center.

"Hey sunshine," Sean says. The boy keeps staring. "Whataburger?" Sean says. He pokes the boy in the shoulder. When he doesn't respond Sean pokes him again, harder. "Look," Sean points at the orange and brown W.

"I'm not hungry," the boy says.

"They're famous here," Sean says. He turns hard, and pulls into the drive-through lane.

"The plane made me sick," the boy says.

"Well, I'm starving," Sean says as he rolls down the window. The menu board bulges where the plastic has freed itself from the frame. Underneath, slender bulbs buzz like nesting insects. "You don't get something now you can't have any of mine."

A girl's voice calls out to them from the fist-sized speaker. She is in mid-laugh, and Sean immediately imagines her as dumpy with curly brown hair, the type of unattractive, but charming girl who is friends with a lot of boys. Sean orders a burger and fries and a

large cola. He is surprised when a pretty girl with pink bracelets on her wrists opens the service window. She looks like a Disney princess about to let down her hair and sing.

Sean sees his son looking at her. He hands the girl cash and says, "He's a handsome boy isn't he?" Sean smiles back at the boy who's pale face has now turned green. The girl ducks down to look, but the boy turns away from her.

"He's cute," she says. She laughs again as she hands over the paper sack of food and reaches back for the soda. When she leans forward to hand the drink down Sean stalls.

"What's a handsome boy eat at Whataburger?" Sean says.

"What does he like?" The girl says. Sean thinks about this. He doesn't really know what his son likes.

"How about a Whataburger Junior? That's good for a man in training, right?" Sean says. He winks at the girl.

"I don't want it," the boy says.

"Add that onto my order," Sean says. The girl looks distracted. She is listening to a hollow voice in her ear. Sean can just barely hear it, and he glares at the fat man sitting behind the wheel of a pickup bellowing into the speaker. The girl pulls the headset off her ear and whispers.

"I can't. You'll have to get back in line if you want to order something else." She readjusts her headset and tells the person idling at the order box to hold on. She shakes the soda impatiently, and Sean takes the cup.

"Dad, I don't want it," the boy says.

"What?" Sean glances over his shoulder.

"I don't want it," the boy says. It was too late, Sean had heard him say "Dad."

When the pair get to their motel it's already early evening. Sean sets his ashtray at the edge of the pool and stands in the waist-high water. The boy is floating in the deep end, his face in the water and his legs tucked so that he resembles a mine of flesh and bone. Sean solemnly watches some blonde women passing by. One woman is wearing an Astros jersey and cutoff jean shorts. The other, a white bikini top and camouflage pants. Both are bound at the wrists by loud jewelry. The women stop at the fence and look at the boy who has just surfaced for air.

"Hey angel," the bikini woman says. The boy blinks. The droplets clinging to his long eyelashes make him look more like a fairy or an elf than an angel.

"He's no angel," Sean says. The women turn to him now. He leans back at the edge of the pool and lets loose a long stream of smoke.

"Just like his daddy," the woman with the jersey says and looks at Sean. She leans forward on the railing.

"I could tell you stories," Sean says.

"I bet you tell lots of stories," the bikini woman says.

"Are they hookers?" the boy says. This makes Sean laugh. He dunks the boy's head under. The women look at each other, and roll their eyes. Sean watches them as they jangle away toward the bar with little green portholes along the side like a marooned submarine. The boy claws at Sean's wrist and comes up sputtering. The boy glares, holding his chin just barely above the water. Sean grins and splashes him in the face then gets out of the pool and stands, dripping. He goes to the room and orders a pizza and

when it arrives they go inside and eat on top of the covers in their wet swimsuits. Sean gives his son the TV remote. The boy sits on the foot of the bed and flips channels. After a while Sean kicks him lightly in the back.

"Choose something," he says. "Or I'll make you read the Bible."

The following day the Space Center rattles with voices and feet. After walking for about an hour Sean begins to feel exhausted. Space exploration doesn't interest him. The landers look like bad movie props. The moon rocks look like rocks he could find in the parking lot. He tells the boy to explore on his own and once the kid is out of sight Sean wanders into the gift shop. He looks at some jewelry, thinking about maybe buying a gift for his teenage daughter. There is a cluster of moissanite rings in a glass case. A pink Space Shuttle T-Shirt. She won't like anything he gets, so Sean decides to save his money.

Sean is well into a book about the Challenger explosion when he sees a young woman with Cleopatra braids holding the hand of a little girl. From here he can see the woman is not wearing a wedding ring. Sean abandons his book before finding out what went wrong.

"I like your dress," Sean says to the little girl. The girl looks up at him, then at her mother. The young woman says they are waiting to go in the theater to watch a movie about the Apollo missions. She has a southern accent straight out of an old western. She says her name is Nina. The girl's name is Trisha. Trisha squints and blinks a lot at first, which makes Sean think there might be something wrong with her, but now the girl gives Sean an incredulous look that is too wise for her smooth round face.

"You alone?" Nina says.

"My son is here somewhere," Sean says. He hurries to find the boy. His son is standing by a rack of dehydrated "Astronaut" snacks. His hair is standing on end and Sean has a fleeting vision of the boy being struck by lightning. Sean pats the hair down impatiently.

"Let's go check out the movie," Sean says.

"Can I get these strawberries?" the boy says.

"Did your mom give you money?" The boy shakes his head frowning. This is expected. "What about Rick the Prick?" The boy says no. When Sean first dubbed Rick as "The Prick" it wasn't because of anything he had done. Sean hadn't actually met him when he came up with it, he had only heard stories and a terse physical description from his daughter. Lean and mean, was all she said. Sean didn't believe she meant he was actually mean, like grumpy or anything, but mean like a race car or a fighter jet. Something that could cause a lot of damage if used by the wrong person. Sean figured she was trying to make him jealous.

Sean buys the strawberries then goes to the ticket booth. After he buys tickets he sees the boy has wandered over to another exhibit. Sean drags the boy to the theater. All the people who were lined up are gone, but inside the theater he sees that Nina has saved them seats. The boy sneers at her as they slide past.

"He's a looker," Nina says.

"Takes after his daddy," Sean says.

All through the movie Sean can smell Nina's shampoo, the piney tinge of her left armpit. Their arms accidentally touch, but she doesn't pull away. Then Sean notices the boy squirming next to him.

"Sit still," Sean says.

"I feel sick," the boy says. He tries to move to the aisle. Sean grabs his son by the wrist and pulls him back hard, but the boy heaves over and vomits in Trisha's lap. The girl won't quit screaming no matter what Sean says or promises. Nina pushes him away and says, "Fuck off." The lights come up and Sean sees the strawberry lumps, as red as blood, spread across the girl's dress. Trisha starts screaming louder now and Nina hustles the girl to the bathroom. They have to stop the movie. A large man in a tight t-shirt stares down at Sean from the back row. Sean stares back until the man turns away and walks his two boys out of the theater. A uniformed teenage boy with unnaturally black-hair comes up the aisle with a broom and dustpan in hand and a cringe of anticipation on his face. Sean turns to leave but sees the boy sitting cross legged on the floor. For a second he thinks the boy might be having a good time. He swats the boy over the head with a pamphlet and they head out of the theater.

Sean watches the boy suspiciously as he skips across the parking lot and into the Whataburger. He's all smiles now. The incident at the Space Center reminded Sean of when he took the boy to the movies a few months before. He knew how much his son loved the first Jurassic Park, and it was an easy sell getting him to see the sequel. But the boy grew irritable when they were waiting outside the theater.

"Why are we out here?" he said, his voice high and childish. He watched other people going into the theater with a look of dread and pulled on his father's wrist. "I want a good seat. We're gonna have to sit up front."

"We're waiting for somebody," Sean said, looking toward the food court. He thought the girl behind the counter at Panda Express was staring at him but then he noticed she was playing with a small wind up toy.

"But I thought me and you were..." The boy said and trailed off behind a flurry of bells echoing from the cave-like arcade room across the lobby. Sean didn't answer. He was a little annoyed that Rhonda was late, and now it would change the whole dynamic of how she and the boy met each other. Instead of the two of them coming upon Rhonda as if by accident, making himself and the boy both the lucky participants in fate, she would run up on them like an uninvited guest. A hanger on. What was worse is that she ended up bringing her own ten year old son, Fabien.

"His daddy fucked me over again," Rhonda said as she jogged through the lobby. Sean used to like that Rhonda didn't censor herself, but now he saw her as being sloppy. Her hair was all in tangles and she was still wearing her pink nursing scrubs. She kissed Sean on the cheek, and he smelled coffee on her breath. The boy and Fabien didn't say a word to each other, immersed as they were in their own gloomy distaste for the unfamiliar. The boy insisted on sitting between Sean and Rhonda during the movie, and he spilled most of his soda and popcorn on her feet. Rhonda barely said anything when they walked out of the theater, and when they parted ways Sean knew it was over. The boy was excited, talking a mile a minute about dinosaurs and DNA and cloning.

“It’s not really science-fiction,” the boy said. “They could make dinosaurs if they wanted to.” Sean thought about a real dinosaur, trotting alongside his SUV like an overgrown Labrador. They just watched a T-Rex snacking on dozens of innocent people.

“Why would they want to?” Sean said. The boy looked at him then like he was a simpleton.

The boy takes a while considering the Whataburger menu, then orders a chicken sandwich. Sean flashes the cashier a look but the sleepy teenager just holds out his hand for the money. After they get their food Sean follows the boy outside to the front patio. They sit at an orange metal table which is hot to the touch.

“They’re famous for their burgers, you’d think you’d want to at least try one,” Sean says. The boy pushes his hair out of his eyes and looks up.

“I like chicken,” he says. The traffic behind the shrubs is loud. A truck honks and Sean almost chokes on his food.

“Here, try mine,” Sean says, still struggling with the bread and meat tickling his throat. He tries to hand his burger over to the boy, but he sticks out his tongue.

“I don’t like all that stuff,” the boy says. Sean takes his burger back and eats sullenly.

The boy takes two careful bites and sets his sandwich down.

“What’s wrong now?” Sean says.

“It tastes funny,” the boy says. Sean watches him for a moment. He balls his fist under the table.

"You're not gonna eat it?" Sean says. The boy looks off into the distance, as if there were something worth seeing there. Something he recognizes. But this whole place, this whole city has the anonymity of sameness. Sean thought Texas would be more impressive, but Houston looks like every other place.

"I just want to go home," the boy says.

Sean snatches the sandwich away from his son. He holds it for a second then stands up. He wants to chuck it into traffic. To see the sandwich arch then begin to separate. It's parts raining down over the middle of the road. Lettuce. Patty. Bun. The foil catching a breeze and lifting away, only to fall victim to the grate of a tractor trailer. Sean doesn't throw the sandwich. He hands the boy back his lunch, mashed as it is.

"Just eat it," he says.

Back at the motel the setting sun squeezes through the plastic blinds and lays itself over the television screen like a cat looking for attention. Sean pulls the drapes and flops on the bed. The boy is tired and not talking. Just as well, Sean thinks, what is there to talk about? The boy cradles the remote like a prize he has won. Sean is just waiting for him to fall asleep. Tomorrow they will be on a plane back home. Maybe he should cancel the other trips he has planned with his son.

Sean leaves the room when the boy's breaths begin to fall in a steady pattern of sniffs and sighs. The air outside is still hot, but the bar with the submarine windows glows a cool blue against the regular yellowing signs and street lamps. Two sick looking palm trees wag in the breeze pushed out by the traffic. He hears music. Off key singing. According to a half torn flyer it is karaoke night at the Little Paloma Lounge.

Sean begrudgingly pays the three dollar cover and goes into the bar. To his left a potential singer stands in the middle of a dance floor freckled with orbs of light from a giant disco ball. He is waiting for his song to start. When Sean sits down at the bar he notices every interior wall is mirrored, and finds it hard to avoid looking at himself until he hears a woman's voice.

"Hello Lou," she says. Sean turns to the woman on the barstool next to him. She has light hair which seems to absorb every flash of color in the room. One moment it is purple, then green, then red, then gold. Her smile is slow and amiable with drink.

"I think you got me mixed up with someone else," Sean says. The young man on stage screams the chorus to "Brown Sugar," as a few of his buddies woot from behind a banister around the dance floor. The bouncer is standing nearby with his arms crossed high over his chest.

"You don't remember me?" she says. Sean is always being mistaken for someone else. He wonders if there are men just like him in every city making the same dumb mistakes, saying the same dumb things. Or maybe this version, this Lou guy is different, more successful in his efforts. Sean examines her face, then let's his eyes travel down over her pale blue collar bone, and the glinting crucifix draped down between her breasts.

"How could I forget," he says and accepts his glass of Jameson from a harried bartender. They cheers.

"I remember you Lou, because Lou is short for Lucifer," she says and laughs.

"That's right," Sean says and downs the glass.

"I'm Sandy by the way, in case you don't remember," she says. Sean tries to get the bartender's attention but he seems to have dedicated himself to a group of bachelorettes in feathered boas. Sean takes out his cigarettes and bangs the pack on the bar.

"Here, drink mine," the woman says and passes him a slushy thing in a plastic cup. "It's too strong from me anyway."

Sean locks eyes with the woman and sips from her straw. He does recognize her now, or he imagines he does. At the moment the sour brightness spreads over his tongue the young singer begins to strip off his clothes, much to the bachelorettes' delight. The bouncer charges forward and grabs the singer by the neck and pulls him off stage. He is followed by a chorus of boos. The bouncer pushes the man toward the door. A table of older women whistle and reach out to pinch at the young man's naked stomach as they pass. The bouncer stops short of the exit and turns back to the dance floor. One of the man's friends, a chubby red-headed dope, has picked up the microphone. He starts to sing and strip in the same manner of his buddy. The bouncer runs to stop him and the dope swings wildly, connecting with the broad side of the bouncer's face. The bouncer tackles the man, and the other men behind the banister rush to pile on top. The bartender starts cussing and pulls out a small bat. The bachelorettes scream and mass together in a protective roost. Sandy grabs Sean by the arm and takes him outside.

Sean stands below a trembling street lamp. He looks back at the bar as if he doesn't know how he got there in the first place.

"May I have a cigarette, dark lord?" Sandy says. Sean still has the pack in his hand. He let's her choose her own. She puts the cigarette in her mouth and says, "Anywhere you go, anarchy reigns."

Sean is annoyed by her talking. He lights her cigarette and starts to walk away.

"It's been fun," he says. Sandy clops up alongside him. Her jewelry sounds like loose change.

"Oh come on, can't take a little joke?" she says. She takes hold of Sean's wrist and pulls him into the intoxicating cloud of perfume and booze that surrounds her, the sweetness of fresh tobacco on her breath. "Why so glum?" she says.

"My kid hates me," Sean says. Sandy's eyes well up for a second. She smiles and touches his face.

"Kids are stupid," she says. "Why don't you invite me to your place?"

They kiss and Sean sparkles all over. He feels boyish and weak, which in turn makes his most brutish urges surge. He grabs her hand and leads her past the fencing, and around the swimming pool which now looks dark and bottomless.

"You gotta be quiet," he says when they get to the door. Sandy makes a motion of buttoning her lip. Inside the TV flashes the walls and the floor and the mound of blankets and extra pillows in the boy's bed with the same squares of technicolor. Sean stands over his son and listens to his breathing. The boy's hair is poking out from a seam in the blankets. His hair is so blonde it is almost white, as shocking today as it was the day he was born. Family members said he looked like a tiny Harry Caray and they used to buy him Cubs stuff even though the kid had never been to Chicago. One of their upcoming

trips is supposed to be to Chicago. They were going to see a game at Wrigley and eat deep dish. Now he is glad he didn't buy the tickets.

The springs squawk as Sandy sits down on Sean's bed. Sean turns angrily, then softens when he sees her laid back trying to stifle a giggle.

"Goddamnit," Sean says in a forced whisper. Sandy flips off her heels and they thud on the floor. She covers her mouth in mock shock. "For fuckssake," Sean says. Sandy starts to pull Sean in with her tan legs wrapped behind his knees. She lays her arms out over her head and let's them hang off the other side. Sean glances back at the boy. He hasn't moved. Hasn't made a sound. He turns back to Sandy. Her eyes are fixed on him. The anger drains from Sean and there is only longing. The smell of her begins to waft up to him again, replacing the aroma of old pizza and mildew. The sour stink of the unwashed child wrapped in the sheets.

"This isn't a good idea," Sean says as his legs begin to buckle.

Belly Flop

Devin should still be at work for a few hours. I walk past the bobbing ferns in the side yard with my towel over my shoulder, a plastic grocery sack full of freezer burnt hot dogs, buns, and an assortment of fixings in one hand, and a blue cooler in the other. Inside the cooler beer bottles crack heads and jostle for position in a bath of quickly evaporating slush. I didn't bother to put a shirt or shoes on before I left my apartment. I just drove across town bare chested.

When I get to the gate I peek through the gaps in the slats and listen for the tinny echo of swimmers. I could turn around now, if the promise of isolation should be thwarted by Devin's other friends playing hooky from work, or God forbid, neighborhood teenagers who've grown bold enough to climb the fences. I hear nothing, but in that nothing is everything. Birds gossip incessantly, then quiet as I open the gate. A dog barks once. He's locked in the house next door. He can't see me but he knows someone is there and barks again, tentatively, as if he's not quite comfortable with the sound of his own voice. I wonder what I smell like to him, and what information he might discern from my smell. Does he know I never turn on the air conditioning in my apartment? Does he know I don't buy dryer sheets because they are expensive and I'm not sure what they do? He

apparently decides for all that I may be I am not a danger to him or his home and so does not bark again.

I set my stuff down on a chair and walk around the edge of the pool on tip toes as if the placid water is still dozing in the mid-morning light. I come back around to my cooler and take out a beer. The mealy flavor seems appropriate for breakfast. I sit down at the edge and put my feet in.

I wasn't going to take Devin up on the offer to use his pool, but then the morning was warm and I remembered that summer was soon ending and I hadn't swum at all. Even at Devin's wife Maria's birthday party I just stood around the pool drinking, trying to talk to half-naked people without looking too much at their fleshy, early-thirties bodies. Devin offered me a pair of trunks but I politely refused, given the chub I felt pressing into the cold metal of my belt buckle. I regretted the choice though because soon I was alone, cowering under the patchy shade of a blighted oak tree, while the others seemed to quickly fall into a euphoric state, their skin shining, slick as new born babies. I left the party early, only barely drunk and substantially sunburned.

I had been having this recurring dream where I am swimming in an open body of gray green water, alone, a thin stripe of yellow land just in sight. I woke up this morning after having this dream again and asked my invisible therapist what it might be about. She is the voice in my head I came up with after my wife June first asked me to see somebody. June claimed I had no self awareness. This may be true, but I knew how expensive therapy was and I thought a little introspection might do the trick. I had been to a counselor in college when I was having panic attacks about tests and whatnot, so I knew the line of questioning and tone pretty well.

"Was it a nightmare?" My invisible therapist said.

"All I feel is relief," I said to the dappled ceiling of my studio apartment. I'm still not used to waking up and seeing that ceiling. My invisible therapist tapped her pen on her big white teeth.

"You're far away from land. Far away from your problems," she said.

"That's right," I said.

"But you're in the dark waters, floating in the unknown," she said.

"I didn't say the waters were dark," I said. "It's pleasant, cool."

"And the land is occupied. Filled with people?" she said and wrote in her notebook.

"I don't know. The land seems deserted," I said. "Maybe it's just that I know I have to swim back to shore." I glanced at the clock. It was flashing 12:00.

"The pools will all be closing soon," she said and smiled mournfully. Then Devin came to mind. I pictured his house just outside the city limits. A smallish gingerbread, with a dramatically peaked add-on wrapped around the back like a modernist tumor. The former owners ran a pool company that went bankrupt. Their house was foreclosed on and Devin picked it up for a penny given the location. There was the outdoor pool, as well as an indoor pool that wasn't functioning, and a hot tub housed beneath a portico.

"My friend offered to let me use his pool, maybe I should have one last swim before it's all over. He said anytime I wanted," I said and started to pull back the sticky sheets. My invisible therapist seemed like she wasn't quite finished with me yet.

"Last time we spoke you were keen on reconciling with your wife. Is this really what you should be doing with your time?" I ignored her. I got out of bed, pulled on my trunks and headed straight for Devin's house.

Once the sun has warmed me up a bit and the first beer of the day is gone, I pad around to the steps. The water wraps itself around my waist. I feel a little lightheaded off the one beer. I think about pulling down my trunks, but the invisible therapist butts in and says "What's that about?" Instead I swim to the edge. I can just barely reach my cooler. I drag it over and take out another beer. I clamber onto a slightly deflated raft and float out into the middle of the water. When the second beer is gone I start to feel drowsy. I think about how I was always warned to never swim alone. My invisible therapist sighs.

"Even if you are an expert swimmer and even if you don't cramp up, you could drown," she says.

"That's all part of the thrill," I say.

Hunger wakes me up again. I get out of the pool and drag Devin's barbeque grill out into the sun. It is one of those little tailgating grills with a St. Louis Rams logo. I can't help but wonder why Devin doesn't buy a nice Weber or something. At the party it was kind of embarrassing to watch him try to cook on this thing. I could tell Maria was annoyed, standing there in her bikini with a white paper plate made flimsy by the dampness of her hands, bending under a mound of potato salad. The grill gets hot quick though, so I put my hot dogs on and get back in the water. That's when I hear the gate slap against its frame and see Devin emerge from the shadowed side of the house. He has this stricken

look on his face and I think maybe I misunderstood, that his offer to use the pool “anytime” wasn't meant to be literal. I should grab my cooler and go, but he sits in the pool chair right on my towel.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey," I say. I lower myself a little deeper in the water. I wish I was naked, then the awkwardness would be understandable. Devin and I are more acquaintances than friends. We had a friend in common, and when that friend moved to the west coast we were left in this city like two polar bears on an ice drift, not quite starved enough to eat each other. Our wives became friends, and so that was that.

I like him, but we don't ever talk of things of substance. I mean, I tried. When I was over for his wife's birthday he asked me about June and why she wasn't with me. I was surprised Maria hadn't told him yet, because guessing by the look I got when I told her happy birthday she was already well aware of my transgressions. I took the moment to test out this thing with being honest. I started to say that June had left me when I noticed Devin looking over my shoulder. He stepped to the side and clapped my back as he went to greet the next person at the gate. When he came back to continue our conversation I told him June was sick.

Looking at Devin now I'm at a loss. But it's not just him. I wasn't expecting to have to talk to anyone today, and now I find myself tripping over what to say. Whenever I have functions to attend or family gatherings it takes several hours of meditation for me to be socially adequate. I have to unlock that part of my brain that produces bullshit conversation. But in those instances I know I belong.

"Water's fine," I say stupidly.

"Yep," Devin says. He rolls up his sleeves and I see his hairy forearms. He reaches one of those hairy forearms into my cooler and grabs a beer. That's okay, I guess. I don't say anything about it. He drinks the beer quickly and grabs another. I almost say something. I only have a couple beers left. But he's letting me use the pool. I can always get more beer I guess. There's a Circle K down the street. Devin burps loudly, then looks around the empty yard as if he didn't own the place.

"So, what's up man?" I say.

"Shit," he says and opens the fresh beer. He sips this one then lays back and stares up at the sky. He's still wearing his office clothes. Pewter green pants and a white long sleeve button up with a navy tie. I've never seen him in his office clothes. He looks old. Grown up I guess you could say. I don't like it. I mean, I started freelancing to avoid people in office clothes. Whenever I hang out with Devin he's usually wearing a hockey jersey, or he's shirtless. I almost forgot he's a CPA.

"Shit?" I say.

"Yeah," he says.

"Hm," I say. I start to feel the sun baking my head. I know my hair is getting thin back there, and suddenly I realize I didn't put any sunblock on. I always forget to do that until I start burning. I swim under the shadow of the diving board to avoid further damage.

"Did you hear what happened?" Devin says and sits up. It takes him a second to locate me under the diving board.

"No," I say.

"Where have *you* been?" he says.

"Remember Maria's party? We were talking and I said I wanted to go *off grid*. Get rid of the smartphone and all that crap. Well, I did it man. I fucking did it."

"Oh, that's great," he says and pauses. His face goes through a series of odd exercises. Like a test pattern for emotion.

"It's spectacular," I say. "Going on four weeks now. I'm totally disconnected."

"That's great," he says and finally settles on a frown. He places his beer down near his feet. He is wearing light brown leather oxfords, and his socks are navy with little flecks of gold. For a second I wish I had the kind of money where I could dress well. Maybe not in office clothes, but a nice pair of shoes would go a long way to make people see me differently.

"You really believe that?" My invisible therapist says.

"Sneakers and jeans. Fucking t-shirts. That's all I wear," I say. "I infantilize myself. I'm thirty-five years old, maybe it's about time to dress like an adult."

"It's notable that you believe shoes might change your life. Adulthood is about behavior, not costumes," my invisible therapist says and pats down her silk pant leg.

"Clothes make the man," I say.

"And now you are giving credence to a cliché. You celebrate independent thinking, yet here I see a willingness to conform if it means acceptance."

"Not acceptance, just a foot in the door. A peek at the real world," I say. She looks at me as if to say "which real world?"

The pool filter slurps like a old man with a bowl of soup. Devin scratches his left eyebrow and squints at the sun.

"I admire that. You know. The self control," he says.

Self control? When people start saying stuff like that it kind of ruins the whole idea for me. I don't like to think of getting rid of my smart phone as something I had to have strength to do. I like to see it as more of a return to the way things should be. But explaining this might come off as pretentious so I just smile, and try to brush off the compliment with the same line I've been using for everyone.

"I think it has more to do with me being cheap," I say. Usually people just laugh and move on after I say that. They talk about some meme they saw on Instagram or some Facebook thing and they cast me back into the wild with the other out of the loop weirdos. Devin just nods and kind of rubs his knees. I get out of the pool quick because I think he's about to say something. Also I forgot the hot dogs I got going on the grill. The smoke reminds me. The smoke and the sizzle.

"You want a dog to go with that beer?" I say, real jolly. I'm trying to hold on to that festive, *anything goes* attitude that comes with summer, but Devin doesn't respond to my offer. When I open the barbeque a golden leaf falls onto the grill and then slips down among the coals. My instinct is to snatch at it with the tongs, but the leaf curls up and is gone almost instantly. I pluck the two blistered hot dogs off the grill—I was going to eat both of them but whatever—and I fix one up for Devin and walk it over to him. He's staring at his oxfords. I don't have a free hand so I poke him with my elbow. He takes the hot dog and looks at it. I can see that he is sweating through his button up. His tie is loose around his neck.

"So you don't want to know what happened?" he says.

"Do I need to know?" I say and take a bite of my hot dog.

"What do you mean?" he says and smiles uncertainly. I chew for a moment, thinking.

"Does it affect me now? Like, is there a tsunami headed our way? Are there North Koreans storming the beaches?" I say. Devin looks confused. My invisible therapist gets up from her chair and starts to walk magnificently around her office.

"In the grand scheme of news that batters us relentlessly, how much of it has contributed to the general anxiety that all but ruined the last few months for you? You say you feel as though summer has passed you by like a distant parade, a party you weren't invited to? Disconnecting, that's part of your greater plan to rid yourself of unwanted intrusions in all forms, and enjoy only what is right in front of you," she says. I sense a tinge of condescension in her voice. My invisible therapist goes on. "But one might worry about greater isolation, and self-centeredness. Not understanding the world at large still moves despite your denial of it."

Sometimes I wish she would shut up already. June is gone, I'm not sure why I keep on with this internal analysis. It seems though I've lost control over it. Devin stares off into the distance. The back of his house is now draped in shadow. The sun is beginning to bend away to the southwest, but the heat is still strong. I grab a fresh beer from the cooler. I chomp on my hot dog then I take a big swig of beer and feel the cold rush past my heart and down into my belly. I go around to the steps and climb back into the water. The water feels slightly cooler now. Devin stares down at me from the pool chair.

"You should get in," I say and make room to accommodate his splash. He looks over the water with trepidation as if he isn't the same guy I saw two months ago passed out drunk in an ice cream sandwich shaped raft.

"No," he says a little too forcefully. He picks up his beer again and finishes it off. He sits there panting. His face is all red, and he reconsiders his tone. "Not right now," he says softly.

I finish my hotdog and move away from Devin, holding my beer above my head as I swim into the deep end. I get back in the shadow of the diving board and place my beer there on the edge. I can still see Devin in the pool chair, sitting on my towel. He is quaking a little. I wait for him to open his mouth again, and when he does I slip under the water.

The air in my lungs makes me buoyant. I release a flurry of bubbles and sink. The bottom of the pool is pocked like the surface of the moon. I try to walk across it, but it doesn't quite work so I float in place. It seems quiet down here, but then I hear my heartbeat, and I remember I need to go to the doctor for that numb spot on my leg. I hear the pool filter humming and I wonder how much water Devin wastes filling this thing every summer. I start to feel the pressure on all sides.

When I look up again I can make out a dark shape which is Devin in the pool chair. I feel like I'm gazing back at the Earth from a spaceship. It's familiar but strange at this distance.

"You fear you're not good enough," my invisible therapist says. She is back in her plush leather chair. "You fear you cannot console, and so you choose to not engage. To not be put in the position to have to console." I want to argue but the instinctual, self-preserving panic thrashes its way to the surface and I come up coughing. Startled, Devin drops his hotdog. The hotdog hits the ground, falls out of its bun and rolls right into the

water leaving behind a spectacularly vivid trail of mustard and ketchup. Devin starts to cry.

I get out of the pool and saunter up behind Devin, who is now bent over sobbing. "There, there," I say and leave a wet handprint on his back. Devin then tells me everything and I listen. The words rush past me, and though I understand the tragedy of it all and meaningless of the violence he has witnessed I have no reply except "There, there."

"Which really doesn't mean anything, does it?" I say to my invisible therapist. "*There*. It really means *here*. It's a reminder. You are here. You are not elsewhere. You are not where the bad thing happened. Which is not much of a comfort, is it? Because being here doesn't negate the existence of there."

My invisible therapist shrugs.

"Nor should it," she says.

"I wish I could forget to panic like I forget to put sunscreen on my bald spot," I say.

"You want to live without vulnerability," my invisible therapist says.

"I don't know. Maybe the existence of these vulnerabilities is really just a matter of perception. Weakness born out of an awareness," I say.

"So pain is what? A result of our self awareness? We are aware of life and so it must end. But if we are unaware we can live forever?" She says and scooches forward in her seat. She is angry now or something. I can't tell. I can never tell when people are angry with me, even if I made the person in my mind and supposedly control everything they say and do.

“Yeah, I guess. Then I could stay at the bottom of the pool. I could build a house out of sunken pool toys and eat drowned spiders. I could watch the surface freeze over and darken with fallen leaves,” I say.

“No,” she says. “That is just blind egotism. Or worse. You would be an automaton. A solar-powered vacuum robot knocking around an office building until the sun burns out.”

I snort dismissively at the thought and Devin stops crying.

“I’m sorry,” he says and wipes at his cheeks.

“For what?” I say.

“For ruining your day,” he says and sniffs. “I know you probably planned on being alone, but when I saw your car I was so happy. Honestly, I didn’t even know it was your car. I was just happy to have somebody to talk to.” An autumnal breeze hits me in the back and I shudder. We watch a gang of leaves scrape across his concrete patio.

“The frost is on the pumpkin,” he says. I’m shivering now.

“Hey Dev,” I say tugging at the faded pink bath towel I brought along. I tug and tug but Devin is still staring at the leaves. Purged of his burdens he’s in a sort of satiated coma. I tap him on the shoulder. Nothing. “Dev, you’re on my towel,” I say. The towel my wife and I bought together at Target with a gift card given to us at Christmas. The towel is the lone survivor of a set, too frayed for her to bother taking when she left, but has suddenly become very precious to me. I pull with all my might, and Devin stands up. I tumble backwards over the last few feet of patio into the grass near the fence.

Devin comes to my aid.

“Oh man, I’m sorry. Are you all right?” he says. He helps me up, brushes me off and drapes the battered towel over my shoulders. Blood is running down my leg, gushing from a smiling wound just above the knee.

“Dude, you look badass,” he says. He pulls his phone from his pocket and takes a photo. There is a forgetful smile on his face. He fiddles with the phone a moment then walks over to where I’m standing. He puts one arm around my neck and pulls me close, closer than we’ve ever been.

“Wanna see?” he says.

Devin has more beer in the house. He thinks he might have chips and salsa too. He runs inside and comes out again with an armful. We make a feast there on the ground. Not just the chips and salsa, but cookies, olives, and a block of cheese. He brings a bottle of whiskey too. We have a little party for ourselves. Devin gets drunk and happy. He takes a lot of photos with his phone. He's a bit of an artist in fact. I never knew this about him. He shows me the photos he has taken. Some of them are pretty good. Maria in the cosmetic moonlight of a marquee. She looks so beneficent I almost forget her scornful look at the party, and how she ignored my witticisms about masculinity and grilling. The way she looks in the photo also implies Devin's love for her, and his desire for others to see her in this same false light. There's another photo of a smashed pack of Marlboro Reds next to a rainbow bruised puddle of oil. This one is a little on the nose subject-wise, but well composed, and suggests a naive creativity that makes me feel tender toward Devin. He flips through to the photo of me with the blood spilling down my leg. I'm struck by the way it seems to have transformed my pain into something quirky and I laugh out loud.

I pose willingly for his photos now. Here's me on the diving board, my body poised dramatically, ready to split the water like a blade. Here's me in the air, a blur of graceful motion. Here's me slapping the water with the full force of my expansive belly. Here's me all the way at the bottom of the pool, like a memory grown fuzzy around the edges. Here's me at the surface again, laughing like a fool. You can't even tell how much the belly flop still stings.

I finally get Devin to loosen up and enjoy the water while I take photos with his phone. He strips off his clothes there on the patio, just down to his boxers. He does a cannonball nearly on top of me, then flips in the water, and darts from side to side. I am laughing. My laughter bounces back off the little portico and hits the surface of the water like a miserable canned thing, a recording replayed through a machine. But I force it, laugh harder, and when Devin comes up again he laughs too. We are laughing so hard we don't notice Maria at first. Devin sees her and becomes quiet, but I keep laughing. Her face is bruised by tears. Her blouse is stained by sweat. Devin lifts himself from the pool and hugs his wife. They stand together in a spreading puddle.

"Did you see it? Oh my God, did you see what happened?" she cries. I snap a few more photos of Devin and Maria clenched together by someone else's tragedy, beside a crystalline jewel of a swimming pool. Behind them the sun glows orange and finally collapses behind the rooftops. Shadows stretch across the flattop lawn like they are being sucked toward an unseen black hole. The leaves rustle to life again, swirl and spill into the water, bringing with them the cold of a new season.

"Come on in," I say to Maria. The words squeak out from my nearly frozen core. "Water's fine."

Second Safest City in America

Eddie had been awake for a while, lying on the futon and listening to Ben's parents talking softly and moving around upstairs. At one point Ben's stepmother had opened the basement door and stood at the top of the steps, her silhouette crisp as a paper cutout against the wall. Eddie could tell she was listening. He held his breath until she shut the door quietly, careful not to let the latch bolt click.

When Ben finally woke up, Eddie pretended to be asleep. Ben shook Eddie by the shoulders and the boys went upstairs. The smell of coffee sat in the kitchen like a permanent resident. Eddie walked around with his nose up, sniffing. His mother drank tea, and it's lack of a distinct aroma made Eddie feel as though his mother was being duped. Ben poured himself a cup. He offered to pour Eddie some, but Eddie said it never tasted as good as it smelled.

"Here's how you fix it," Ben said, then reached up and grabbed a bottle of Saint Brendan's from a high shelf. He poured some into his coffee, stirred and took a loud sip. He then poured some of the liqueur into a mug and handed it to Eddie.

Ben talked on the phone for a while Eddie sipped his booze and ate cereal in front of the TV. He flipped through cartoons, talk shows, soap operas. Eddie stopped on CNN. They were showing videos of American soldiers pulling down Saddam Hussein's statue.

The statue was stubborn, and it took a while for it to bend at the ankles. It got stuck with its hand out as if to offer a conciliatory handshake to the men tossing stones and chunks of concrete. There were more videos of soldiers pissing in gold toilets, and weaving down the highway outside Baghdad. He saw the blackened shells of cars, and bodies covered by sheets with just the charred feet sticking out. The reporter said Saddam had yet to be found. The statue had been toppled several months earlier.

After a while Ben got off the phone and said his friend Patrick was going to pick them up. The boys went outside to wait. The neighborhood seemed empty. The summer had reached that point when all the lukewarm swimming pools were abandoned and kids lost interest in their own freedom, surrendering instead to central-air and the pulsing trance of video games. Eddie squeezed the clear juice from a Capris Sun over the grass. It was already too hot even for the ants to come. He lay back and watched an airplane cross the cloudless sky. He followed its path until it disappeared beyond some houses, all the time expecting it to veer off course and explode, raining body parts and flaming luggage across the town. When he sat up again Ben was crouched near the garage, trying to light a ball of dry grass on fire with his new Zippo. The grass smoldered between his feet then flamed softly, full of sparks, and was gone just as quick.

Patrick arrived in a blue minivan with Jeremy hanging out the passenger window waving devil horns and wagging his tongue. Patrick stuck his head out his window and gave Eddie the finger.

"Hey pussy," he said. "Should we hit Ashley's house first?" Eddie wasn't sure what he meant, so he just laughed. He hated the sound of his own laugh, and shut himself up quickly. Eddie felt a punch of disappointment learning that Ben had already told Patrick

all the things he had confessed the night before. About how he and Ashley got together, and how it all ended. He probably showed Patrick the photograph too. The one of Ashley in her underwear standing between mounds of laundry, her body wrapped in warm light as if she were standing in front of a fire. It wasn't a sexy image. Eddie felt like he was peeking in her window while she searched for clean socks. Now he imagined Patrick looking at her and licking his thin lips. Eddie hated Patrick. He had high cheekbones and sunken eyes that made him look sort of like a sick old lady. He tried to compensate for this by acting macho.

Eddie slid the door open and climbed onto the middle seat. Jeremy handed him a warm can of Bud Light. Jeremy looked like a chubby version of the young Bob Dylan, and had all kinds of crazy stories. Ben told Eddie before that Jeremy made all that shit up, but Eddie still had a kind of esteem for Jeremy. If he made that shit up he was a great story teller. Eddie opened the can of beer and lowered his head below view from the van's window. Jeremy laughed.

"Seriously, nobody gives a shit," he said. Ben jumped into the van beside Eddie, and threw his back pack full of fireworks into the backseat. Jeremy handed him a beer and bowed.

"Here you are, kind sir," he said.

"Where'd you get the booze?" Ben said.

"We hit a garage on the way here," Patrick piped up.

"Sweet," Ben said, the beer spitting under his knuckle.

"You ever been garage shopping Eddie?" Patrick said. He was staring at Eddie through the rear view mirror. Ben looked at him.

"Uh..." Eddie said. Patrick raised an eyebrow then shook his head. They drove away from Ben's house, but hadn't got more than a block before Patrick started to slow down again.

"There's one right there, how about it Eddie? Try your luck?" Patrick said and looked at Eddie again. They pulled up in front of a house and Patrick pointed at the open garage. Inside the garage Eddie could see a couple of mountain bikes, a red power wheels jeep, an olive green trashcan filled with hockey sticks, a kite held up between the rafters with its tail curling downward. Useless relics of childhood.

"Just in the nick of time too," Jeremy said. He guzzled his beer until it was gone, wiped his lips with the back of his hand, and opened another with a flourish. "Last one," he said and slurped.

"Ah, fuck you Jeremy," Patrick said and tried to grab the can.

Eddie finished his beer, groping for any last dregs of courage that might be clinging to the bottom. Half a block ahead he saw a mail truck pull up to the curb. The mail woman jumped out and stood in the street staring at the boys. Her hair bun looked as stiff as a door handle. Her calves gleamed in the sunlight.

"Nah, let's go. Too close to home," Ben said.

They picked up another couple of Ben's school friends in a neighborhood where all the streets were named after famous painters. Picasso Street. Matisse Circle. Van Gogh Avenue. Pollock Place. The boys stood in the red lava rocks like a pair of desert wanderers next to some emaciated palm trees and the big wooden painter's palette that marked the entrance.

Chase was a big guy, already donning a thick red beard. Eddie had met him once before, at a party in the basement of Chase's parent's house. His family was gregarious in the way Eddie wanted his family to be, and his mom let the boys drink while she sipped wine and laughed with her tan-faced girlfriends upstairs. Chase pushed into the middle seat with Eddie and Ben. He gave Ben a kiss on the cheek.

"How ya doing sweets?" he said.

Tom was much shorter, with a bowl top of black hair like a Sherpa. He was a smart guy, everybody said so, but he didn't talk much so Eddie wondered if this was just an assumption people made about quiet guys. People often thought Eddie was smarter than he actually was. Tom was straightedge, but without the punk uniform. He dressed more like an embarrassing dad, in white sneakers and a ratty t-shirt tucked into his faded blue jeans. Eddie thought Tom was okay. He had also met him at Chase's party, but Tom's lack of participation made Eddie uneasy. It was like he was observing their behavior for research. Tom nodded at Eddie then climbed into the back of the van and started ruffling around inside Ben's back pack. He pulled out a pair of Roman candles.

"These look like trouble," he said to no one in particular.

Eddie soon learned that garage shopping was what it sounds like; stealing. And though Jeremy described their previous adventures with gravitas it was obvious to Eddie their's was a graceless strategy. The boys would drive around looking for any open garage. Refrigerators were the main target because they promised booze. Beer, liquor, liqueurs, it didn't matter as long as it had alcohol. Run in, run out, that was basically it. But the boys also had an ongoing competition.

"Our trophies," Jeremy called it. They stole anything that was in sight. A single rollerblade. A giant pink teddy bear with the name Michelle stitched in script across its belly. Jeremy claimed he had a stuffed owl that was now on display behind his drum set. Ben had the Zippo. He hadn't told Eddie how he got it before.

Jeremy went into the first open garage and returned to the van without incident, as if to prove how easy it was. He tossed a six pack of High Life cans into Chase's lap. The boys didn't hesitate to start in on the beers, and they were soon sucked dry. Their next attempts weren't as fruitful. Chase ran into what was little more than a drive under with a few metal trash cans and a deep freeze filled with some unidentifiable meat. At the next house Tom ran out of a small detached garage with a neon green jug of Margarita mix held over his head like the Stanley Cup, not realizing it didn't have any alcohol.

When they pulled up in front of a big two-story house with a wrap around porch and a few frail saplings, Patrick turned around and smiled at Eddie.

"You're up this time," he said. Eddie froze with what he hoped was a look of dignified resistance on his face. Ben patted his shoulder.

"We'll go together," he said and pulled open the door.

The boys got out of the van and crossed the front lawn side by side. Ben walked confident as ever, while Eddie crouched over inspecting the black sprinkler heads poking up from the grass. They looked like tiny watch towers. Eddie could hear the van idling in the street behind them, its fan belt scraping. He could also hear the other boys laughing.

The previous afternoon Eddie and Ben had been hanging out in Ben's basement bedroom. Ben kept picking at his braces and sighing. Eddie felt ashamed for not being

able to think of anything fun to do. When they were younger they didn't have to try hard to entertain themselves. The pair hadn't hung out at all that summer. Ben had changed high schools the year before and had made all his new friends, joined a band, and started dating Ashley. Soon after Ben stopped returning Eddie's calls.

Eddie didn't have a lot of other friends so he had spent most of his summer doing work around his mother's house and babysitting his little sister. He was trying to earn money to put toward a car. The work made him feel like a man, especially when he got to fix something or pour gravel on the path. But what his mother laid out as an achievable goal at the beginning of the summer now seemed foolish. He had barely over three hundred dollars. When Ben finally called he sounded desperate, but Eddie didn't care. He begged his mother to drop him off before work but she refused. Then he asked if he could go over when she got home, and maybe spend the night. Even though Ben's parents wouldn't be around the next day she agreed.

Eddie had been the one to suggest they go outside. As the sun began to lean into the horizon the boys set out onto the empty streets. Bikes seemed childish so they wandered the town on foot. They walked up to the Wal-Mart where Eddie pushed Ben around the parking lot in a shopping cart, crashing into other carts and ramping off curbs. They went inside the store and kicked rubber balls down the toy aisle and hunted each other with Nerf guns in the kid's clothing section. The frumpy workers there just stared at the boys. None bothered to try kick them out, so Ben and Eddie left, Ben looking sullen and Eddie feeling more and more like a disappointment.

The pair cut through the ragged strip of woods behind the Wal-Mart and investigated a garbage choked creek bed, then crossed over to the little league baseball

diamond where they shot off bottle rockets from the pitcher's mound until the outfield grass caught on fire. The fireworks made a lot of festive noise, but when they were spent the echoing silence that followed made the closing day seem that much more desolate. They returned to Ben's house to eat pizza and watch TV.

When Ben's parents went to sleep the boys snuck out of the house again and walked up to the nearby elementary school. The night air was still stiff with heat, and the bugs chattered so loud that Eddie couldn't hear his own footfalls in the gravel. For a moment he lost track of his friend in the darkness and began to panic, but Ben flicked his Zippo and led the way through the small field to the playground. Ben had brought along a plastic sports bottle full of tequila he pilfered from his parent's liquor cabinet, and the boys sat on the end of the slide—which stuck out like a blue tongue—passing the tequila back and forth.

Ben started talking about Ashley. Eddie tried to listen but he was distracted by the graffiti all over the playground equipment. Amateur pieces ranging from the uniquely profane to the absurdly hateful. The meaningless ramblings of unoccupied youth. Carved into the blue plastic slide were the skinny squiggle arms of a swastika. To one side an amorphous dick crawled in smeary black marker. Below that an anarchist's brand was solidly drawn with a paint pen. Near the entrance to the spire that rose above them someone had drawn an American flag on fire and someone else tried to conceal it behind a blot of spiraling pen. There were other male appendages. Smiley faces and peace signs. A mesmerizing pair of cartoon tits without a head. Eddie's hypnosis was finally broken when Ben struck the lighter and waved the flame in front of Eddie's face.

"Earth to Eddie?" Ben said.

"What?" Eddie said.

"I said, what if I burned the bitch's house down?"

The temperature dropped maybe ten degrees as Eddie crossed over into the shadow of the garage. The cement floor had a roughly cut square of carpet in the middle that was stained with oil. There was a big white refrigerator at the back wall. To the right of the fridge all that separated the boys from the inside of the house was a screen door. Eddie listened for people, but heard only the sound of far off rumbling. Someone was home watching an action movie. Ben opened the refrigerator and the contents clattered.

"Shhhh, man," Eddie said.

"It's cool," Ben said and got in deeper.

"They might hear us," Eddie said. Ben peeked over the top of the refrigerator door. Inside the house, light from an unseen television scattered over the kitchen linoleum.

"No worries," Ben said and ducked back down. A man stepped into the kitchen wearing beige cargo shorts and a blue polo shirt that pinched tight around his belly. His naked feet slapped the floor. The man went to the cupboard, retrieved a bag of chips, and walked away crunching. Eddie tapped on the back of the refrigerator door.

"But Benjy," Eddie said then stopped himself after realizing he had called Ben by his kindergarten nickname. At that moment Ben came out of the fridge with a bottle of vodka in one hand, and a two liter of Pepsi in the other.

"Grab the beer," he said. Eddie looked into the fridge and saw an unopened 24-pack of Budweiser. Ben sprinted out of the garage, leaving Eddie lugging the box and struggling to catch up.

The other boys welcomed Ben and Eddie back to the van with cheers, and they were about to speed away and drink their spoils when Jeremy started talking shit. He refused to be outdone, and convinced Patrick to drive to a house he knew nearby. Jeremy was in that garage a long time. The boys were goofing around in the van, and Eddie was handing out beers to everybody when Jeremy yelled out. He was sprinting towards the van as fast as he could. Behind him the garage door was closing. Eddie saw the large sandaled feet of a man frantically dancing in the shrinking bar of daylight. Two bottles of beer rolled on the concrete, and a third lay shattered in a bed of yellow froth.

Jeremy threw himself against the side panel of the van. He wasn't even inside yet when Patrick started to drive away. Patrick quickly realized this and slammed on the brakes. The rest of the boys all pitched forward and cursed him for it. Jeremy got in the front seat and slammed the door. Once they were out the neighborhood and Jeremy caught his breath, he turned around and grinned. He said he tried to take a pair of antlers off the wall but they were bolted down.

"The old fucker pointed a gun at me," he said.

Patrick drove to a nearby soccer park. The fields were reduced to swaths of hardened, cleat pocked mud. The goal nettings had been taken down, so the posts looked like bone gates to multiple universes. As they drove by, Eddie tried to imagine stepping into one of these worlds, but couldn't conjure up an image of himself that was any different than how he was at this exact moment and decided then it was a stupid thing to do.

The gray birds hopping around the overflowing trash cans flew off toward the coolness of the trees as the van approached. Patrick parked in the shadow of a shuttered

concession stand. He turned the stereo up and the boys passed around the bottle of vodka, washing each gulp down with a swig of the Pepsi. Eddie passed out the last of the beers.

"We should cheers to something," Chase bellowed.

"Ashley's a slut!" Patrick yelled out, and winked at Ben. They hoorahed and drank. Jeremy challenged Chase to a drinking contest. They stood off to the side of the van and chugged as the rest chanted. Jeremy claimed victory, though half the beer went down his shirt. They threw the bottles, cans, and the empty box down the storm sewer and onto the field. No one wanted to go home and there was some argument about what to do next. Patrick was too drunk and giggly to drive, so they elected to put Tom behind the wheel and lurched off into the afternoon.

Chase was the first to start with the fireworks. He slid open the van door as they sped down the highway and launched a bottle rocket at the billboard that claimed in happy blue script that their town was the *Second Safest City in America*. Next Patrick dropped a string of black cats in an intersection just as the light turned green, leaving behind a flashing bulb of smoke. They pulled into a Hardee's drive-through and Jeremy started to order an "extra spicy chicken sandwich" then sprayed the order box with a shower of sparks. Later, as they were driving down a residential street, Ben held a Roman candle. He and Eddie were discussing what to do with it when Patrick lit the wick. Ben struggled to open the door and point the Roman candle away as the rest of the boys laughed and ducked for cover. The first flaming ball, a brilliant cadmium red, pattered harmlessly into the street.

"Aim for the car," Tom yelled. Ben loosely aimed at a dented Toyota parked across the street. The second shot flew in a liquid green arch toward the car, then bounced off the back wheel lighting for a moment the dark space below. The third burst forth more vigorously, its sizzling blue body ricocheting off the hood and into the grass. Tom heaved the van around as the fourth crackled up into the sky like a little yellow sun. The Roman candle puffed for a moment, and the boys moaned with disapproval, but then a fifth fiery orb hooked out, its orange tail twisting, and plunked against the side of a mailbox. Ben shot four more into the woods as Tom turned back onto the main road.

From that they created a game. They drove around shooting Roman candles at parked cars and Tom gave out scores based on some arbitrary calculations. Chase shot up the bed of a mammoth diesel truck. "Seven points," Tom said. Patrick aimed for the tailpipe of a yellow hummer with the stick family decal on the tinted back window. "That's a nine," Tom said. Ben blasted the flat face of a green hippy van. Tom held up five fingers and shook his head saying "Too obvious. Too obvious." Jeremy held his Roman candle like a bazooka and launched at a purple PT cruiser, and that put him in the lead with a perfect ten.

When it was Eddie's turn he spotted a silver Honda Civic parked in the driveway of a vinyl sided ranch house. Other than the paint job, whiteouts, and rear stabilizer it was the exact car Eddie had been saving up for. The driver side door hung open as if expecting someone. Tom drove the van slowly.

"This looks like the one," Patrick said. Tom turned the van around and came back up the street. Eddie held the last two Roman candles and tried to think. It felt like his

heart had swollen up and taken over his whole body. It was thudding now against the thin wall of his skin like an animal that had outgrown its cage.

"I bet you could get one in the door from here," Ben said. Eddie took Ben's Zippo and bounded out of the van. He ran up to the open door of the Honda, lit the fuses and tossed the fireworks into the back seat. When Eddie was running back to the van he could see the look of horror on the other boys' faces. All except Tom, who looked as sober as a traffic cop, and for a second Eddie thought they might drive off without him.

"Holy shit," Jeremy said as Eddie climbed back into his seat. They all want quiet and watched the car like an egg about to hatch. The Roman candles started lighting up the inside. Red. Green. Yellow. Then the colors were obscured by smoke. Tom sped away. Eddie looked around at the other boys. After a moment Ben started laughing and soon they were all laughing.

The boys drove around for a while. They were loud and rambunctious again, and Eddie was at the center of it all, a hero. Eddie was drunk on the booze and the camaraderie. Even Patrick seemed deferential to him. But somehow during this time they retraced their path through the neighborhood, and drove past the ranch house with the Honda. The van fell quiet again. The car was already a smoking shell, but the fire had spread to the garage. Flames curled back the vinyl siding as a young man in shorts and a woman stood on the lawn with their hands over their faces. The firefighters and police had just arrived and were too busy to notice the van full of drunk teenage boys. The ambulance driver saw them though. He was leaned up against the side of his truck facing the street. He pinched his cigarette and looked straight at Eddie. He was smiling.

"Go, go, go," Patrick hollered and smacked Tom in the back of the head. Tom cursed and hit the gas. Eddie turned to look out the back window and saw the smoke spreading over the street.

Tom dropped Eddie and Ben off at the entrance to Ben's neighborhood and sped off again without goodbyes. The boys then walked along the chain link fence that surrounded the elementary school and playground where they had spent the previous night drinking. Some children played there now, screaming joyously, their voices bouncing around a cement tunnel through which darkness reigned even in the middle of the day. An older girl sat in one of the swings gazing over the copper brown gravel with the disinterest of an underpaid prison guard.

As the boys walked toward Ben's house, Eddie felt like a gasping fish left on the bank. He was sure that the police would come for him soon. Maybe they were already surrounding his house with their guns drawn. He saw his mother and sister coming out the front door with their hands up. He decided then he would tell the truth. He would take responsibility for all of it. All the money he had saved, he'd give it to the people he had hurt. He'd make it right. He'd be a man about it. He had gone too far.

"I'm sorry," Eddie said. Ben, who was walking ahead of him a few feet, stopped and turned around. His braces flashed like a blade.

"Why?" he said. "That was the fucking coolest."

Ben had never said that Eddie was cool before. They had been friends since before being cool mattered. Eddie smiled. His mind was wiped clean, sheathed in a cellophane

wrap of coolness through which nothing could penetrate. He had to say something cool, something worthy of this new persona.

No, that was the hottest, Eddie thought to himself. Oh boy, that was dumb. Maybe he would just give Ben a cool look—a raised eyebrow or some kind of snarl paired with an improvised gang sign—but when he looked up Ben was already running toward his house. Eddie had to sprint just to keep up.